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JOY OCHS

# **“You’re Not Typical Professors, Are You?”: Reflections on the NCHC Faculty Institute in Miami and the Everglades**

JOY OCHS

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**A**t the close of the NCHC Faculty Institute in Miami and the Everglades, our group went out for a celebratory dinner at a Cuban restaurant in Miami. Between the main course and the dessert, one of our group struck up a conversation with the young man selling flowers on the sidewalk outside. As we left the restaurant a short while later, knots of participants still locked in animated conversation, the flower vendor remarked, “You’re not typical professors, are you?”

He was responding to the effects of our City as Text<sup>®</sup> experience, and he hit on the quality that makes City as Text such a unique and important pedagogical method: we are not typical professors, and we do not teach typical classes. Our students—even the flower vendor—can immediately sense the difference.

What happened in Miami that produced such a noticeable effect?

At the beginning of our institute, we allowed ourselves to experience the disorientation of not knowing. As experts in our fields, we can all too easily hide behind a mask of knowing more than our students. Not knowing is an uncomfortable place to be. But for our students, the disorientation of not knowing is their primary state of being. By putting ourselves as instructors in the same position as our students, we create a space for a new kind of learning to take place. The subject matter is no longer a holy relic to be passed carefully from master to disciple. Instead, the subject matter emerges in the process of examination by teacher and students alike. In fact, in the City as Text approach, there is no distinction between teacher and student: the learning process is undertaken equally by all.

For many participants of this faculty institute, the disorientation of not knowing began the moment we stepped off the plane. If Miami was our subject, we knew scarcely anything about it, from the climate (we northerners were simply dressed wrong) to the linguistic barriers (some shopkeepers speak only Spanish). Even the Institute’s choice of hotel was disorienting, replacing the

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expected box hotel and all its amenities with a quirky and incommodious hostel. My room, just big enough for a bed and a chair, was located a block away from the front desk, in a courtyard behind an unmarked iron gate. I hadn’t packed shampoo, pens, or an iron, expecting to find them in my room. The Clay Hotel offered none of these; my room also lacked an alarm clock and a working telephone. One member of our group was so thrown off balance by this unfamiliar environment that he actually left to go book a room at a more traditional hotel before lack of vacancies drove him back again. However, the strangeness of this environment served a specific purpose: it knocked us out of the complacency of routine and forced us to interact with the environment in innovative ways. No alarm clock? Open the curtains and sleep facing the place where the sun will come up. Program your cell phone to vibrate in the morning. Purchase a cheap clock at the local thrift store. In a state of disorientation, we had to be more receptive to our environment than if everything happened according to expectations. This initial disorientation primed us for the City as Text excursion on the second day.

On the second day of the Institute our task was to move from the disorientation of not knowing to the responsibility of finding out for ourselves. The City as Text methodology calls for three levels of information-gathering: mapping, observing, and listening. We were sent out in groups of three to different sections of Miami Beach, where we would make our observations and then report back to the group. We first had to map our area—or define the boundaries and parameters of the space. The boundaries aren’t simply geographical; we looked at things like patterns of usage (what defines this as a residential rather than a commercial space?), demographics (is this an integrated or segregated neighborhood? High income or low income?), and design (does this space have a coherent sense of place, or is it fragmented?). Next, we made observations and listened to residents in order to discern the significance of the place. Patterns not immediately obvious from the mapping exercise began to emerge.

The disorientation of not knowing primed us to be receptive to our subjects—to prepare to see them in unanticipated ways. The topic of our institute was “Built and Endangered Environments,” with on-site exploration of Miami Beach and the Everglades. Without setting foot in either place, we all made the reasonable assumption that Miami Beach was the built and the Everglades the endangered environment. But once we were on site and responsible for finding out for ourselves, we found we had to reconsider and revise our definitions of “built” and “endangered.” Tasked with learning about the nature of these two places, we quickly found that we had to discard what we thought we knew and pay attention to what was actually there. For instance, my perceptions of a modest residential neighborhood in Miami Beach changed significantly when I learned that monolithic high-density, high-rise housing was encroaching on the dwindling areas of single-family residences. Under the pressure of high-profit developments, this more modest neighborhood was endangered. Already, workers in the service sector, such as the doorman and the street sweeper we

interviewed, couldn't afford to live in Miami Beach. What will happen as even more of the modest dwellings are replaced by luxury condominiums? Even the beach of Miami Beach is endangered as waterfront condominium complexes wall off sections of beach for their residents' private use.

The Everglades were no less surprising when we explored them on our third day. Our preconceptions of this place were of a wilderness inhabited by alligators and mosquitoes and prohibitive to human intrusion. Our actual experience of this wilderness left a far more positive impression as we gawped in delight at the sight of wood storks and gallinules. But finally, as we learned about the bedrock and the periphyton and the sedges and the Water Conservation District, our perceptions changed once again as we came to understand this endangered wetland as a built environment in its own way—both built by natural processes into a complex ecosystem over thousands of years, and built in the sense that the points of human intersection with this natural area are carefully controlled. The paved trail at Shark Valley creates conditions that attract more wildlife and simultaneously constrains human opportunities to view this wildlife. Additionally, by some human calculations, the Everglades are allowed to exist only because they serve the anthropocentric function of drinking water reservoir. In the process of finding out for ourselves—finding out by standing knee-deep in water with algal muck between our toes—we resolved our hazy notions of Everglades-as-wilderness into myriad facets of the place as it is.

A product of the responsibility of finding out for ourselves was an increased self-awareness of ourselves as learners. Participating in experiential learning does not allow students the passive option of hanging back and forming an opinion later. Immersed in the experience, one must constantly assess and refine one's perceptions. This process is enhanced by working with others. Perhaps the most transformative moments came during the "debriefing" portions of the institute, where, after time for private writing and reflection, groups and individuals were invited to share what they had learned about our two on-site locations. Because as observers we all came from different backgrounds—biologists, literary scholars, a policy maker, a geologist, a chemist—no two people saw the same details or discerned the same patterns. Returning from a walk-about and comparing notes, our own observations were thrown into sharp focus by the context provided by others. My own observations about workers in the service sector not being able to afford housing picked up new resonances when a biologist described the process of "unnatural selection" at work in the poor neighborhoods. In the Everglades, individuals focused on water, the plants, the reptiles, the birds, the man-made structures, and from all of these a more comprehensive picture emerged. Excitingly, our subject came into being in the process of exploring it. And our self-awareness as observers increased in the process.

To me, the most important aspect of this whole experience was this: that no matter what the fifteen of us—professors from around the country and from

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diverse disciplines—were doing, whether we were corporally experiencing the disorientation of not knowing, gleefully finding out for ourselves plunged up to the elbows in Everglades water, or deliberately analyzing our own self-awareness as learners, all of us, at every stage, were passionately thinking about how we could carry this pedagogy back into our own classrooms, how we could energize our students as much as we were being energized. This was the conversation as we pedaled bicycles through Shark Valley, this was the conversation as we pounded the streets of Miami Beach, this was the conversation in the hotel lobby and elevators, and this was the same conversation that was still going on as we took our leave of each other outside the Cuban restaurant on that last night of the institute. It was this conversation that the flower vendor overheard, and it is this conversation that makes his observation so fitting: we are not typical professors, and the NCHC Faculty Institute is not a typical learning experience.

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