
J.E.T.T. INTERVIEWS THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR LEARNING LABORATORIES

Robert Jones on Robert Jones

Vanities Calmed, I Bare My Soul

Ho-hum...who could possibly care about what the secretary of IALL does? *That* was my initial response to the editor of *J.E.T.T.* when approached for an interview—having never been interviewed before! With a lot of sweet-talk by the editor, and with one arm tied behind my back, I (alas!) relented when she suggested that this could be the beginning of a fan club and even the inspiration for a possible gruppie groundswell on behalf of the IALL secretary! Vanities calmed, I knew full well that it was the need for copy and the evangelistic zeal of getting the word out about IALL that was driving the request, but I succumbed and promised some sort of soul-baring by the suggested deadline... .

Imposing Order on Chaos

All along, of course, I should have been worrying about getting the minutes of the last IALL Board meeting out to the participants! *That*, after all, is the simple mission of my life when wearing my IALL hat—what else would one expect of someone designated as “secretary?” It’s really not as boring as it sounds and is, in fact, quite an ego trip—imposing order on chaos, as it were, since that’s what an IALL Board meeting is: five to eight people, all talking at once, veering madly from one topic to another as our physical presence in one spot brings out our best ideas and our inspired hopes for the organization; everyone trying to get these illuminations onto the table for a democratic discussion before they vanish into the recesses of our overtaxed minds. It’s not quite that exaggeratedly bad; our president keeps things well in hand, but an awful lot does get discussed

at such meetings, and it’s difficult to suppress the normal enthusiasm of people who can’t really get together often enough to accomplish everything they want to for the entity that is our concern. At any rate, I have the privilege of sorting it all out after the last word has been said and to report to one and all the “essence” of business transacted. I do often contemplate a course in speed-writing and threaten to tape the entire meeting, but I resist in the belief that a frequent plea to slow down, or to ask for a repetition of precisely what motion just passed, helps to settle the dust and keeps everyone on track.

Minutes as Adjunct Activity

As a member of the IALL Board, I share the more substantive concerns of the organization’s Board, so that taking and writing up the minutes seems almost an adjunct activity. The organization wants genuinely to be the lifeline for individuals in charge of, involved in, learning laboratories of every kind and description, and is well on its way toward such a goal. Together with my colleagues in our commitment to the vitality and interests of the IALL membership, I think it’s more important to know what’s going “on the front,” so to speak, than for anyone “out there” to worry about what the secretary is doing—as long as the work gets done!

Director of Language Resource Center, U of W-Milwaukee

But the editor persists in wanting to know more about “who” the secretary is: Again, absolutely nothing extraordinary, and like so many others of you who never envisioned being in charge of a learning laboratory, my background provided me with a Ph.D. in German from the University of Texas, and good fortune provided me with the

opportunity to serve as Director of the Language Resource Center at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. I emphasize "good fortune" in the sense that my dual appointment places me nicely in the center of what I view as important developments in foreign/second language acquisition, and, at this institution at least, has allowed me to be involved in the exciting regeneration and rethinking that is taking place in language teaching, learning, and research. I've been in the position for six years only, but those years have been marked by major changes and attitudes. Labs and Centers (whatever their unique designation) have a pivotal role to play in the new directions that are begging to be taken, and with careful planning and persistence, their advocates have both the responsibility and the opportunity to shape the future for language teaching/learning in this country.

The Excitement of the Wider View

Being the first Center Director and then IALL secretary has honed my perspective a bit, so that

I have had to look at the forest as well as the trees. The interests of the one are so naturally the interests of the other that I would encourage everyone "on the front" to link up with IALL and to enjoy the excitement of the wider view. There's no question but that we need to help each other, and to let others benefit from our experiences of the specific within the context of the general.

My term as secretary of IALL has one more year to run. The IALL Board would welcome hearing from anyone who'd like to move in and take over the exciting assignment I am enjoying now. The Board would probably like someone who could write faster, but that's negotiable in view of all the other talents that could be tapped. Call me first, though, I might decide to run for re-election.