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**Reviewing and Refocusing Doctoral Education in Composition Studies**

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We need to establish curricular structures for our graduate programs in ways that acknowledge both the historical and the contemporary landscape. Successfully engaging in this task means doing more than calcifying old habits as we bemoan a constrained job market. Instead, we need to assess curricular offerings critically, to actually think again about what we require, and why, and whether the requirements continue to make sense in the contemporary context. . . . [W]e must convey to our students the complex intellectual relations and projects of the field as well as our obligations to be responsive to the world around us, using what we have come to know to make that world a better place.

—Jacqueline Jones Royster
Graduate students... implicitly learn a stance toward the world through their acquisition of theoretical knowledge. But this is not the same as teaching students to use theoretical knowledge... to take a stance toward the world and toward the people who inhabit it... [or] preparing students to take stances supported by theoretical knowledge and encouraged by the ethics of the profession. We need to consider more explicitly the connections of knowledge and stance so that we might better understand, and so act on, doctoral education... as somehow oriented to the world ethically and normatively as well as cognitively.

—Richard Marback

For a year beginning in the fall of 2000, I spent too much time on an evaluation of the doctoral program in rhetoric and writing in preparation for my department’s periodic Unit Review Self-Study. The genre of such documents (in this case, an outline including five main points and twenty-one subpoints) focuses on details of the present and the recent past. So I found myself relegating to brief notes and yellow-stickied pages a number of interesting future-oriented discussions of doctoral education in composition studies that I encountered over the past year or so. I return to those ideas, here, with the hope of provoking thought about how those of us interested in strengthening doctoral education in composition should proceed.

The two epigraphs heading this essay—the first from one of the few pieces by a composition scholar in the Proceedings of the MLA’s 1999 Conference on the Future of Doctoral Education; the second from an article in JAC—illustrate several themes in recent discussions of doctoral education in composition. Both of them reflect dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs. Both advocate alternative focuses for the future. And though they are based on different kinds of analysis, both emphasize obligations to the world in which the graduates of doctoral programs will work and upon which they should be prepared to have positive influences.

Jacqueline Royster reaches her recommendation that PhD programs should better emphasize our field’s “complex intellectual relations and projects” and the obligation to be “responsive to the world” by reflecting on the complex “contemporary context” within which doctoral education takes place: the precedence of scholarship over teaching in tenure review, issues of power and prestige within English departments, pressures and problems in the staffing of first-year writing classes, changing social
needs and expectations, mounting public criticism of higher education’s failure to serve the public.

Such issues influence doctoral education in composition—and everything else in English studies—so it is logical that they serve as a context for review of doctoral education and for refocusing the composition PhD. Given the broad nature of her article, Royster’s review leads to general direction—pointing for the future: “We need the courage to see how the world and its needs are changing and to think again about how our field can participate actively in this world” (1227). But more targeted review in light of the social and academic contexts leads Thomas Miller to more specific refocusing:

We need to be thinking about more than strategies for teaching and administering writing. We need to expand our frame of reference beyond the internal workings of composition programs, or even writing across the curriculum. Many of our students graduate with the institutional expertise, intellectual sophistication, and social commitments needed to lead general educational reforms, technological innovations, and outreach programs. If we adopt a civic stance on graduate studies, we may be able to place graduates in positions where they can use their leadership skills beyond as well as within departments of English. (55; emphasis added)

And such review leads to even more explicit recommendations from Richard Miller:

What of graduate work? What role would it play in [a] new, service-oriented writing program that employs not only teachers from English, and Rhetoric and Composition, but also teachers from other disciplines? For my part, I would like to see advanced training in Rhetoric and Composition come to incorporate sustained work in acquiring . . . “the administrator’s point of view”; that is, to complement the intensive study of language and pedagogy, I would like to see the addition of courses that focus on management theory, historical and ethnographic work on how institutions change, labor studies, and unionization, for starters. (37–38; emphasis added)

Each of these sketches of doctoral education in composition studies reflects very clearly a program-development perspective that Richard Young and Erwin Steinberg describe in “Planning Graduate Programs in Rhetoric in Departments of English”: inquiry based on “the relation of the program to its social context” and the assumption that a program “should
be responsive to durable needs of society” (395). Each of them, as well, is strongly influenced by the higher education context within which composition PhD programs—and their graduates—work (such things as faculty attitudes toward writing and teaching, tenure requirements, shrinking tenure lines, and first-year writing requirements and staffing). Those visions for doctoral education in composition also reflect another of Young and Steinberg’s program-development perspectives: inquiry “concerned with the discipline itself” (396). Even better examples of this concern are Stephen North’s Refiguring the Ph.D. in English Studies (a book whose complexity and ramifications for doctoral education deserve more attention than this brief essay allows) and a Composition Studies article in which Beth Burmester discusses North’s book in the context of, among other things, reports growing out of two MLA conferences on the English doctorate and two Rhetoric Society of America panels on the PhD in rhetoric.

In the last several paragraphs, I have emphasized the approach of the first epigraph: using context—social, academic, disciplinary—as a basis for reviewing doctoral education and proposing future changes. But the second epigraph reflects a different approach: using a specific theoretical lens as the basis of review and refocusing. In “Being Reasonable,” Richard Marback studies doctoral education in composition in light of Robert Bellah’s definition of “the ‘true scholar’ as someone who has, in addition to disciplinary knowledge and skill, ‘a stance to the world,’ that is ‘clearly normative or ethical, not merely cognitive’” (821). He believes that the approach Bellah develops in a Winter 2000 issue of Academe “can help compositionists clarify our own abstractions, practices, and debates about freedom and judgment, knowing and doing, so that we may better consider the goals of doctoral education in composition studies” (822). So he translates into Bellah’s terms a number of issues bearing on doctoral education—issues embedded in such sources as the AAUP’s 2000 “Statement on Graduate Students” and North’s Refiguring the Ph.D. in English Studies. Through this method, he offers “reasonableness” as an intellectual foundation that should ground doctoral study and teaching in broad social concerns rather than narrow, disciplinary rationality. “A communitarian conception of reasonableness,” Marback writes, “demands an accounting of what we know that makes sense in terms of normative requirements to draw others into discussion of our shared commitments”; so, for instance, “research claims about the teaching of writing only count as reasonable to the extent that they directly account for the individual and social purposes
of writing pedagogies" (835). In a doctoral program grounded on such principles,

Faculty and students would explicitly concern themselves with developing an understanding of how the broader concerns of a larger public enable and constrain research-supported practices. In light of this understanding, they would concentrate on creating narratives that persuasively justify research-based action to broader publics. They would also focus on crafting research claims within composition studies that take account of public imperatives. The goal is to enable students to discern and represent to a range of audiences the greater common good served by composition research. (836)

I don’t want to dichotomize the two approaches to reviewing and refocusing doctoral programs in composition studies. Clearly, one cannot study context without using a theoretical lens (or lenses); in light of marketing and public relations principles, for instance, the idea that a doctoral program “should be responsive to durable needs of society” could mean something very different from what Young and Steinberg intended. Jacqueline Royster, Thomas Miller, and Richard Miller use theoretical lenses of various kinds in developing their perspectives on doctoral education, then, and Richard Marback is hardly unconcerned with broad contextual matters influencing graduate programs and the world in which their graduates will live and work. But his approach—systematically applying one specific theory to issues and details of doctoral education—is different, and usefully so.

By foregrounding so explicitly the principles of doctoral education that he envisions, Marback gives others the opportunity to use (or adapt) his discussion of “reasonableness” as they refocus doctoral programs or individual graduate courses. Similarly, one of the reasons that Refiguring the Ph.D. in English Studies is an important book is that it elaborates in detail various underlying principles (for example, that a curriculum can bring “disparate elements together under sufficient pressure and with sufficient energy to transform them into a single new entity, . . . distinct from any of the original components”) so that others can consider how or whether the approach may help them transform their doctoral programs (North 73).

That PhD programs need to be refocused or transformed is an assumption of most of the authors I’ve cited. But it seems clear to me that critiques of graduate training and proposals for its improvement are signs of strength in what, as a shorthand term, we call doctoral education in
composition studies. Interestingly, too, most of these critiques and proposals sound as if they are discussing some thing—PhD education in composition studies—rather than a diverse assortment of about sixty-five programs scattered across the United States. As we think about refocusing and strengthening doctoral programs, it is useful to recall Janice Lauer’s observation that “rhetoric and composition doctoral programs began in the late 1970s and early 1980s” in a time of “multimodal scholarship,” and that those “programs became environments in which professors and graduate students could become increasingly literate in these diverse kinds of inquiry” (46). Given such roots and the fact that, at various institutions, research approaches got “contextualized by different fields—literature, literary theory, linguistics, cognitive studies, and so on”—it is not surprising that diversity is a defining characteristic of doctoral education in composition studies (Lauer 47). For instance, my reading of Rhetoric Review’s recent listing of doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition—a crude but handy index—suggests six broad emphases among current PhD programs (with, of course, variations and overlaps). Some programs emphasize research and composition theory: “promotes the study of the production, distribution, and interpretation of oral and written texts”; “focuses on how people produce and understand discourse across a variety of social, cultural, and material contexts, in schools, workplaces, and communities”; and “encourages comparative research” in a “wide range of academic and nonacademic contexts” (248, 258, 270). Some programs emphasize writing pedagogy: provides “the opportunity to prepare for a career that integrates the theory and practice of teaching writing”; “prepares prospective teacher-scholars in historical, theoretical, and empirical methods of inquiry into rhetoric, literacy, and composing practices and pedagogies”; and is “designed for students wishing to teach in community or four-year colleges and universities” (264, 338, 354). Other programs stress cultural studies in research and pedagogy: “emphasizes studying rhetorical practices in their cultural ... locations and includes requirements for interdisciplinary studies”; and “illuminate[s] current practices in pedagogy and criticism. ... The offerings in cultural criticism [are] characterized by a strong interdisciplinary and conceptual approach” (342, 350). Still other programs blend rhetoric and preparation to teach literature: “designed for people who want to specialize in rhetoric and composition but who also expect to teach some classes in literature”; and “designed for graduate students in English whose primary interests are in rhetoric and the theory or composition and who plan to pursue a teaching career in composition and
literature” (344, 340). Yet other programs blend rhetoric and preparation to teach linguistics: “focuses on training teachers and researchers in rhetoric, composition, applied linguistics, and TESOL”; and “prepares graduate students in a range of areas in composition and rhetoric with a strong emphasis on English language studies” (274, 364). While some programs stress technical and professional communication: “The PhD in rhetoric and professional communication focuses on the theory of rhetoric and the practice of written communication in professional communities such as business, industry, and government”; and this program “emphasizes rhetorical foundations of technical and scientific discourse and includes the study of pedagogical research and of culture and communication” (276, 294).

I have two reasons for emphasizing the diversity of doctoral programs here in my conclusion. In the first place, this diversity is a strength of our field. Students interested in teaching in undergraduate colleges, or preparing for careers that bridge the academic and corporate worlds, or pursuing research—of different methodologies and in different venues—have genuine options among PhD programs. The same is true for composition scholars of varying interests and research persuasions who want to be involved in doctoral education. And individual programs are stronger because faculty and students work (developing courses, selecting new students, interacting in seminars, developing dissertations) within a common context.

My second point is that diversity is part of the context that we need to take into account in efforts to refocus or otherwise improve doctoral education in composition studies. For instance, Richard Miller’s idea that doctoral study should “incorporate sustained work in acquiring . . . ‘the administrator’s point of view’” appeals to me personally and professionally, it is consistent with the broad goal of Bowling Green’s program, and it is an approach a number of our students take in their studies (38). But whether it could or should become the central rationale for my program—let alone for the dozens of other doctoral programs in composition—is quite another matter. To help support his view that we should “adopt a civic stance on graduate studies” so that graduates “can use their leadership skills beyond as well as within departments of English,” Thomas Miller notes that many “programs and scholars in composition are involved in community outreach, service learning, collaborations with schools,” and the like, and he names two programs that are oriented in this direction (55, 51). Faculty and students in those programs apparently have found “civic stance” to be an effective program rationale; but it is
rather a different matter whether the same decision would or should be made at other universities, with different goals, histories, and resources. Similarly, I believe that Marback's principle of reasonableness could be used in a great many doctoral programs "to reconceive the politics of graduate education in composition studies [and] to encourage a search for the common good between graduate student exception and faculty assertion" (838), and I also think North's principle of fusion is going to be adapted for use in many PhD programs. But it is hard for me to imagine either principle being adopted as a central rationale of all, or even most, of the doctoral composition programs in the U.S.

Decisions about program emphases and requirements—let alone about the intellectual and ethical climates that give them substance and impact—are made in the context of specific institutions with distinctive traditions and community settings. Every university, write Young and Steinberg, "offers an environment in which some kinds of programs will do well and others will not; not all plants grow equally well in the same soil" (398). And the writing of program goals and curricular materials are (to use words Marback wrote in a different context) "always situated, in attitudes and expectations, in cultures and histories, and in locations that are both concrete and meaningful" ("Learning" 51). Those of us interested in strengthening doctoral education in composition should keep such ideas in mind and center our efforts on the goals, traditions, cultures, and resources of individual PhD programs.

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Works Cited


Throughout the 1970s and most of the 1980s, only a few scholars in composition studies overtly invoked ideology as a way into discussions of the politics of language and pedagogy (some obvious examples are Wallace Douglas, Carl Freedman, Richard Ohmann, and Geneva Smitherman). Yet, in his 1988 *College English* article, "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," James Berlin declared that ideology was the central guiding concept behind all of rhetoric and composition. This declaration generated responses that were published in subsequent issues of the journal, indicating that some of composition's leading voices were uncomfortable with certain claims Berlin made. Linda Flower, for