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REVISING THE DREAM

Graduate Students, Independent Writing Programs, and the Future of English Studies

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If the last thirty years of deconstruction, feminism, and poststructuralist criticism have taught us anything, it is that our stories are not innocent, that every plot is political, and that histories are subject—and subjected—to interpretation and revision. If this belief has become a foundation for scholarly writing *in* English studies, it is surprisingly missing from the writing scholars do *about* English studies. While research on literature, student writing, and culture acknowledge the constructedness of language and discourse, in the stories we tell about our field, poststructuralist layering gives way to prescribed plotted narratives.

The tendency to write about the discipline one-dimensionally, most often as a cycle of “rising” or “falling” paradigms, of “crisis and panacea,” or of “conflict and revision” is not unique to compositionists.¹ But the authors of composition’s declarations of independence are especially prey to homogenizing the experience of disciplinary change. Some of the essays in this volume are a case in point. For every story told here about writing program transformation—including institutional and departmental histories, labor conditions, the structure of the university, and the philosophical concerns of administrators and faculty—there are tales left untold about how such revolutions affect writers and the production of knowledge related to writing. Narratives of “natural and appropriate” change (Deis, Frye, Weese), “self-definition” (Royer and Gilles), and composition as the “democratic” discipline (Aronson and Hansen), and the “hallmark of effective, enduring academic programs” (Deis, Frye, Weese) are scripted by the authors of change. What we don’t know is how these progressive narratives potentially close off other considerations and ramifications of the separation of writing from English. What happens as writing program faculty and administrators seek an independent “self-definition,” but teachers and students of such writing programs interpret “self” and “definition” in different ways?

Perhaps it is the many years of low status in the academic hierarchy that has prodded compositionists towards these histories with happy endings. But as we till the soil for the new field of dreams, we need to look at the variety of fruits from the labor. In what follows, I ask, how do certain interested and invested groups respond to new disciplinary structures, and how does this not only alter their institutions, but transform the system of making knowledge in writing and literature?

In this three-part essay, I first present a discussion of the importance of reception studies to contemporary disciplinary chronicling. I then provide a story of how graduate students in one changing writing program and English department responded to programmatic changes. As the boundaries of the program and discipline were shifting, graduate students were writing their professional identities through departmental memos, email exchanges, curriculum committee reports, and dissertation abstracts. I conclude by examining these lived products of our processes of change within a larger discussion about the future of graduate work in English studies.

THE READING, RECEPTION, AND SYSTEMIZATION OF CHANGE IN THE ACADEMY

Sociologists of knowledge and systems theorists argue that our historical moment is characterized by a level of complexity that makes observing, recording, theorizing, or narrativizing especially difficult. Knowledge of a discipline cannot be simply the outcome of one person, a group, or a school of thought, but rather is the “product” of “our collective lives,” an ongoing activity of narrating, interpreting, and understanding our reception of ideas (McCarthy 17). We process change, adds systems theorist Niklas Luhmann, by connecting our observations of events with our experience of them. Intellectuals try to make sense of such processes through “second-order observations,” describing “*how* others describe what others describe” (Luhmann 45). He argues that we cannot distinguish between our reception of change (our observations) and our representations of change—how we structure change into systems (like the essays written here).

Reception theory contextualizes the experience of systematic change and makes visible the reality that, even as we create separate structures or programs of “writing” and “literature,” our observations and reflections create a new mix altogether. Reception theory changed the course of literary criticism and composition theory by placing the focus of textual

interpretation on the reader or group of readers and on their historical and cultural surroundings. In the United States, work in reception has manifested itself most recognizably in reader-response theorists, who recreated the phenomenology of reception historians like Hans Robert Jauss and reception theorists such as Wolfgang Iser into a uniquely American form of pragmatism that engages readers in disciplinary meaning making.² An example of one well-known theorist who links reader-response theories to professional issues is Stanley Fish. In two of his books, *Is There a Text in this Class?* and *Professional Correctness*, Fish uses aspects of reader-response theory to make rhetorical arguments about the fate of literary interpretation.

Compositionists have adopted reader-response and reception theory because it emphasizes the role of the lay reader and writer and assumes that only with that reader can a text be interpreted or composed. Historians of composition studies integrate reader-response methodologies in their work on chronicling our emerging discipline. They see their discipline as a text and often provide what process theorists call a “movies of the mind” approach to reading this text: a step-by-step *exposition de texte* where personal and communal reaction dictate interpretation.³ But as cultural theorists remind us, there are things outside of texts, and a reader-response approach is limited to describing a one-to-one transaction between reader (or faculty or administrator) and text (or department or curriculum). A one-to-one dialectic of reader and text and the evolutionary narratives of slavery and freedom, so prevalent in the disciplinary literature, do not address what writing means as an activity in our culture and as an academic subject in our colleges and universities. In order to understand how knowledge is made in a transforming cultural and disciplinary matrix, we need a dynamic reception-response approach that integrates experience and observation.

Rhetorically minded chroniclers of the profession have offered a more relational approach to reception theory. A reception approach to disciplines takes into account the society surrounding the enterprise of reform. In his book, *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics*, Stephen Mailloux uses aspects of reception studies to inform his experience as chair of a transforming English department. He explains the thesis of the book as follows, “I examine how particular tropes, arguments, and narratives contribute to historical acts of interpreting words, texts, traditions, and contexts” (ix). Rather than say “here is how something failed or succeeded where I work” or “here is a theoretical

approach I subscribe to," Mailloux records the way different members of the department responded to change and enacted new forms of knowledge. These stories remind us that reception of disciplinary change is part of the new form of the field.

COMPOSING BEGINNING TEACHERS AND SCHOLARS: AN
INTRODUCTION TO THE ACADEMY

The essays in the first half of this volume, and in most writing on the state of the field, tend to begin with institutional histories. But because my emphasis is on the connection between institutional change and new knowledge, I begin with student writing. It was the fall of 1995 when eleven other students and I began a graduate program at SUNY Stony Brook in what was (and had always been) an English department with a writing program. Before we arrived at the university, the director of the writing program requested that all future writing teachers compose brief sketches of ourselves as Ph.D. candidates and teachers. The biographies were to be put together and circulated to the eighteen new Composition 101 teachers, students from the humanities, social sciences, and the arts. I focus on eight Ph.D. students in English who remained in the department during the institutional shifts that occurred in the years to come.⁴

While the histories of writing programs discussed in this volume observe change through accounts of disciplinary reform, graduate student writing represents the experience of students whose place in the academy was outside of the profession's grander plans. In looking back at these statements, what stands out about the English graduate students is their commitment to teaching, to learning about teaching writing, and to sharing various pedagogical histories and philosophies. While all of the new teachers, regardless of discipline, express fear or excitement about teaching, the Ph.D. candidates in English characterize and theorize their place as future teachers of writing. One colleague begins this way: "I've been teaching for two years, while I got my Master's degree. I hope to continue to use some of what I learned in that Writing Program, though I know this program has a different philosophical approach. I hope to use popular culture as a rhetorical tool." Another writes, "I want to integrate my own intellectual interests into teaching writing this year, as I was unable to do that in the community college in which I adjuncted." In my own bio, I emphasize a "need to learn about college teaching, coming straight from college myself." My contribution expresses a desire to "see my own writing evolve with my students," a

desire equal to wanting to become a “professional.” One colleague likens her “insecurity about being in front of a classroom” to her decision to pursue the Ph.D.: “Part of what I like about this profession is its privacy and one’s ability to specialize. I am nervous about teaching writing because I am not sure how to teach it outside of what I know about writing, which is writing about poetry.” Another student, who had read about Stony Brook’s program, writes that he “looks forward to hearing the philosophy of this program from the program creators themselves.”

Most of us understood that there were existing political and philosophical realities in place before our arrival. The Stony Brook program had a national reputation for its composition practices.⁵ But we believed we could write our own histories and philosophies into the program through our teaching. We expressed a need to “read and think and get ‘tools’ and ‘secrets’ of the trade all at once,” writes one colleague. The potential recursivity of graduate school and teaching made us believe that the writing program would be revised with our participation in it. One of the eight English students describes this feeling: “I believe that I can share what I hold true about language and culture.” Most of us viewed our emergent scholarly/teaching careers as separate parts of a larger whole, the whole culminating in earning the Ph.D.: “I know that teaching is one of the steps toward earning the degree—I look forward to it being a painless experience and not a time consuming one.” A handful voiced a potential conflict between teaching and research and between teaching and learning. Yet we all say something about, as one of us puts it, “the love of language,” “the importance of language,” and wanting to “make a difference” through writing and teaching.

While these bios can be seen as naive sentiments of wide-eyed graduate students, they also stand as evidence that disciplinary shifts occur within a context of emerging identities and knowledge. In the middle of the 1990s, these graduate students in English had one thing in common: finding a balance between writing, teaching writing, and research. This commonality would lose balance as our bios would conflict with institutional plans.

PROGRAM INITIATION AND A RECEPTION OF THE PROFESSION: 1995-1996

The early to mid-1990s was a time of recovery and reassessment for the humanities. The theory and culture wars, while no longer raging, were not quite over either. The new paradigm for English was not a new theory or canon but a commitment to “redraw the boundaries,” as the

editors *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, a 1992 Modern Language Association (MLA) collection, put it. Post-culture-war efforts at collaboration and consensus, such as Graff's "teaching the conflicts," and programs in cultural studies attempted to revise and reinvigorate the boundaries of English. But morale was down. These efforts could not change the fact that the "crisis" in the humanities was not just a slogan nor merely a threat by a disenchanted public. The job market was at a low, and literature programs were retrenching.⁶ On the other hand, while literature was redrawing the boundaries, composition's boundaries were rebuilding, "under construction," to quote the editors of another volume on the discipline (Farris and Anson). In the mid-1990s, new Ph.D. programs were started, more tenure-track jobs were created, and various writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC), writing-center, and technology programs were being built.⁷

This post-culture-wars climate of the humanities affected the curriculum for the eight Ph.D. students who began our degrees in the fall of 1995. The initial expectations and aspirations defined in our bios were reshaped in light of two required courses taken in the first semester of the program, the teaching practicum and the proseminar, subtitled, "An Introduction to the Profession." While one course's topic was the teaching of writing and the other course was teaching the conflicts of "the profession," both engaged students in thinking about the discipline as we were entering it. The practicum was taught at that time by the director of the writing program and was meant to introduce us to the philosophy of the program and to the general approaches to teaching writing. Readings were drawn from the textbook chosen for the first-year students, *A Community of Writers*, as well as *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook*. The class counted for three credits, but not for a grade, and we were told that our main assignments were to share teaching strategies, lesson plans, and, on occasion, teaching and composition philosophies. The proseminar on the other hand was credit bearing. Faculty from the English department rotated their responsibility for teaching the course, and emphasis varied with each professor. The readings revolved around sample chapters from *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, and we were expected to produce seminar papers testifying our allegiance to one of the twenty-one approaches to literary study presented in the book.

In the proseminar, we reflected on what the editors of *Redrawing the Boundaries* meant by English as a "field of rapid and sometimes disorienting

change” (Greenblatt and Gunn, 2). For the practicum we were also asked to reflect on our place in the profession and in the academy, yet such reflection was for a particular purpose. As the editors of *A Community of Writers* say, “The main way you learn is by doing the unit’s activities, not by reading theory” (Elbow and Belanoff, 3), and so we were to try out theories in the classroom rather than create position papers. While the proseminar was trying to “introduce” us to the “profession”—where the profession was something abstract and put off—the practicum saw the production of the profession as something immediate, always already happening.

The faculty did not try to link pedagogy and disciplinary theory, nor were we encouraged to do so ourselves. Yet the connections were made. As the semester progressed, the two courses in professional reflection became one activity in claiming a disciplinary identity. In the face of these two boundaries we were drawing bridges between crisis and reality and between coursework and our professional aspirations. I believe we fundamentally understood that literature was not so much “in crisis” as it was already exploded into many disparate pieces. And we knew that composition was rebuilding, “under construction,” but the final structure was still uncertain. Graduate students read the writing on the walls of our institution and the discipline, which told us that we needed to sift through the building blocks and create a collective, productive plan for pursuing the profession in an age of change and disciplinary reconstruction. So after a few weeks, four of us started up a writing program newsletter, which included review articles on literature and composition conferences as well as a “Best Lesson Plans” column. In the spring cultural studies seminar, three of us produced collaborative projects on theories of language and cultural studies pedagogy. And the teaching-portfolio groups we joined doubled as study groups for other courses.

FROM COURSEWORK TO A CASE STUDY OF CHANGE: 1996–1999

It turns out that these efforts were purely academic—philosophical and pedagogical, but not pertinent to the prescribed programmatic plans of the administration. In March of 1996, the provost issued a report citing findings of a 1994 “Task-Force on Writing.” This report claimed that there was not enough writing at the university and not the right kind of it. It was part of a long study on various programs at the university and how they were meeting or failing the new “undergraduate mission” of the university. The English department was singled out as ignoring needs of the school’s new populations. Some of these needs

were defined as “ESL tutoring, grammar, and mechanics.” For most of the graduate students, the very existence of this task force was news, and our first instinct was to dismiss it as biased, for no writing teachers had been consulted before the report was written. But soon enough, parts of the report were found in mailboxes and emails, and the graduate student listserv circulated a rumor that the newly hired dean of arts and sciences intended to separate language “skills” from literature teaching. While it was only a rumor, committees and meetings began to spring up, and suddenly most of the work we did as graduate students was framed by the debate between language and literature.

Graduate students took the criticism of the writing program as our own. We wrote emails discussing our fears about losing our teaching-assistant appointments in composition should the writing program be removed from the English department. The writing program newsletter and our portfolio groups were put on hold for the while, and we began to write and study the fundamentals of our precarious positions in the academy. A memo that circulated in early spring, sent to the provost and dean and signed by the president of the Graduate English Society, sums up the situation as we read it: “We understand the [provost’s] draft plan to be preliminary and . . . we are extremely concerned about the impact of these changes on graduate student workload, training, and representation.” The chair of the English department followed suit, defending graduate students and writing program faculty. In one of his memos, he asked, “What does poor grammar and a writing program’s location in English have to do with one another?”

Of course, as we were busy drafting memos, holding meetings, and awaiting news from deans and chairs, we also went on with our “progress toward the degree.” That spring, I enrolled in an independent study with the former director of the writing program. The topic was “The History and Theory of Teaching Writing.” Influenced by reading case-study and ethnographic research, I decided to include a survey of my colleagues as part of the final project. I asked ten questions in all, most of which were follow-ups to the concerns addressed in the biographies. But one question produced the most telling results about the dissonance between graduate student experience and programmatic change.

For the final question of the survey, I asked, “What do you think of the proposal to separate the writing program from the English department?” All eight students said that they were “opposed to the split.” Two colleagues write that they “reject the very phrasing of the question,”

which, as one student puts it, “assumes that because a department can be split the act of writing and reading—literature and rhetoric—is in a binary opposition.” And one student asks a question that connects “writing program independence” with the continuation of Ph.D. programs in English studies: “when there are no jobs for Ph.D.’s in English, what is the use of making more divisions in programs and divisiveness among humanities teachers and scholars?”

We began asking these questions in our courses and continued them in the context of actual curricular and disciplinary debates. The following semester, the fall of 1996, I was appointed graduate student representative on the “University-Wide Search Committee on Writing,” organized by the dean. We were told that this committee was charged with “expanding the standards and offerings for writing at the university and hiring a new director of the Writing Program.” Along with the interim director of the Writing Program, who had become my advisor, one other faculty from the writing program, and twelve faculty members from a variety of departments other than English, I attended the six meetings held that year. As part of this new role, I organized meetings of all the teachers of writing in order to create a community of compositionists who could speak about our practices. But it was the eight English students who were most invested in the philosophical and physical transformation of the writing program. We compiled evidence suggesting that graduate students should be trained as teachers and teachers of writing. As liaison between graduate student teaching and undergraduate education, I planned on presenting to the committee curricula we created and how our scholarship and teaching connected. Yet such issues proved at odds with the two charges of the committee; there was no time for cultivating soil for a field of dreams. Suddenly, at this research university, we were to make decisions without research or evidence; writing was an emergency, a crisis, and we were to change the course of literacy immediately. While it took three years to get a cultural studies certificate passed and two years to start a mentoring program at my university, this committee was told that the structure and function of writing were to change overnight.

And it did. While we discussed a long-term WAC program and theories of composition, in the end, the committee’s deliberations resulted in hiring a new director of writing and in compiling an eleven-page report, published in June 1997. This report, written by representative members of the committee, recommended changes in the curriculum and staffing of the writing program but did not say anything about the

graduate student/English/writing program connection. Decisions were made in five meetings and decided by majority vote; the writing program faculty, and I, were not in the majority.

After the vote, the committee disbanded. When we returned the following fall, the new director was in place, as were the new requirements. Graduate students worried about both the trivial and the critical facets of our future—we had to adjust to new mailboxes and new programwide curricula for the first-year writing course. But the real adjustment was not found in curricula or degree requirements. In the fall of 1997, the writing program became, without any discussion or meeting, the independent Program in Writing and Rhetoric, which would eventually grow, we heard, to a department.

THE STORY UNFOLDS AND CONTINUES: THE EMERGENT ENGLISH STUDIES

There are many ramifications of the move toward independence. It is too soon to say how these changes will affect undergraduates; most of my colleagues, who in 1999 and 2000 were still working in the writing program, claim that their students don't recognize the shifts. Yet the graduate program is completely transformed. Most new graduate students are not opting to focus on composition and rhetoric, and literature students don't get very involved in composition theory, conferences, or pedagogies. The composition requirement is now two semesters, and graduate students in English, who used to teach four to six writing classes, now average two to three. The few composition faculty who were teaching before the split now teach literature exclusively or have left. Six full-time lecturers have been hired, as well as two tenure-track faculty.⁸

I could end here, with a eulogy for the ending of a writing program as I knew it or a commencement speech for the beginning of a department that I will never know. But the changes I list above are structural. They represent only a simple transaction, a transfer of power. We need to ask what the lasting implications for knowledge in language and literature might be for the field.

For the remainder of the essay, I trace how three students produced dissertations in very different topics under the similar constraints of a fractured department. These students began their dissertations together, immediately after the writing program split. If dissertations represent the zenith of a graduate students' reading, research, and writing and the precursor for new knowledge in a profession, then we need

to try to capture the process of these changes in light of current disciplinary reconstructions.

AFTERWARD: WRITING KNOWLEDGE IN A CHANGING
DISCIPLINE, 1998–2000

In the spring of 1998, Stony Brook's Humanities Institute held a symposium on "The Future of the Profession." As third-year students in the English department, we began to realize that this "future" would be our present. It was at this time that two other graduate students and I began our dissertations and decided to form a writing group. We met a total of sixteen times over a period of eighteen months. What began as an activity to help us finish the dissertations became a study of creating knowledge in our present moment of disciplinary restructuring.

We were three students of very different aspirations and scholarly interests. I wanted to work at a university in composition studies. Another member wanted to be a modernist at a small liberal arts school, and the third member wanted to teach early American literature, "wherever I can," as she said. When we met for the first time our conversation focused not on American literature or composition theory or Joseph Conrad but instead on the perennial graduate student question, "How do you get the dissertation finished?" But such prosaic questions soon revealed themselves to be profound and unresolved conflicts in the structure and purpose of graduate study in English studies. It was at this point that I began taking notes on our meetings, a task we eventually all took up.

We came to the second meeting prepared with outlines of our proposed first chapters: I wanted to begin a dissertation on contemporary composition with a history of "process" philosophy. The member interested in early American literature also wanted to begin with an overview, in her case, of the role of women in the Revolutionary War, and our third member wanted the first half of her dissertation to provide a history of anthropology, to later connect it to the history of modernist literature.

We all agreed that completing the first chapter was crucial to getting us on the right track. But this "track," and the progressive histories we were beginning to write, stood in opposition to the lack of linear path our department and disciplinary affiliations were taking. We debated the chaotic nature of the state of the academy, in contrast to the stability we were supposed to create in highly specialized dissertations. We were writing in a professional vacuum. The writing program/English department

split changed the way we saw our committee members, who were now labeled by their affiliation with the English department, with the writing program, or by their opposition to that labeling. The persons—and the profession—for whom we were writing had, in the scope of three years, disappeared.

Discussions on the struggles of writing a first chapter became conversations about the struggles of the profession and why representing ourselves in the form of a dissertation was difficult in ways other than the obvious strains of composing a book-length project. By the end of that first session, we had defined our first chapters differently. All of us decided to expand on our historical introductions. We created sections indicating where our big-picture overviews did not, or could no longer, correspond to any contemporary reality in the profession. For example, we realized that a chapter on the role of emerging women writers in early American literature related to our metadisciplinary discussions on the place of literature and writing. I acknowledged that a history of “process” required some discussion of my process of coming to this topic in the first place. The modernist of our group wanted to continue to write about anthropology and literature, but not without “explaining the issues that arise when two disciplines are working on similar questions and studying the same texts.” We were trying to write dissertations, but we were also completing unfinished discussions on writing and literature begun three years ago.

My first chapter turned out to be on disciplinary theory, a topic that came out of the shifts in writing and English at my university. The dissertation on American literature began with a section on “print culture and women writers of the revolution” and included a long concluding paragraph about the importance of early American women writers to understanding more contemporary issues about culture, reading, and writing. She said she understood that the topic of her dissertation was “obscure, a hard sell” but that choosing this topic was “important to do, because it is not obvious why anyone would care about these writers.” She linked this task to the task of any scholar/teacher in writing: “We need to stress the importance of what we do.” She continued, “We need to explain our work to others and my topic helps me to do that.”

The third member of the group researched on the modern novel and anthropology as planned. But through her research on cultural encounters and because of her encounters with, as she put it, “our graduate student dissenters” she came to also argue for the dissolving of the terms

“modernism” and other period labels. She spoke about her decision this way, “I wanted to break down literary barriers, a result of the experience of arguing about theories in the proseminar and then living them out with the dean and the faculty.” She told me that she had not planned, nor even wanted, to “delve into the whole ‘what is English?’ debate.” But, she added, “I had spent so much time with you and at those search committee meetings and this stuff was in the air, so that is where my thinking went.”

After we all had completed the first two chapters of the dissertation, the tenor of our group workshops changed. We were reading each other’s work not just to ask questions or edit but to connect ideas and bridge our different issues, theories, and arguments. We didn’t plan on integrating our dissertations in any way; indeed that task would, we thought, take us too far afield from the goal of finishing the degree. Yet we each felt as though completing our program meant making sense of how we began. Without the structural framework of one department or of a unified sense of a “Writing Program,” these connections came in the form of layering our dissertations with one another’s ideas and writing. When I finally did get to my third chapter on the history of the process movement in composition, the modernist in the group discussed the link between theories of process and the way ethnographic writers discuss cross-cultural encounters. The process that many early American authors took to become known had a striking resemblance to the way modern writers became “modernist” and to how literary critics or process thinkers became theorists. And so we discussed the connections, sometimes citing each others’ sources, other times just noting the impossibility of segmenting out our particular dissertations as “free” or “independent” from the others’.

While I am mentioning only some of the shifts our dissertations underwent, I believe these examples provide material for asking essential questions about our stories of the discipline and about the way we are progressing in composition studies. This “integration” (of our group, our dissertations, and, by extension, our degrees) was a theme throughout the nearly two years of dissertation writing. Our dissertations were commenting on the pace and potency of change in our program as we earned our degrees. We could not imagine what writing that resulted from a more stable, unified disciplinary structure might look like. Are there any such dissertations (or disciplines)? And if we live in the age of synthesized, hybrid knowledges, why are we beginning to carve out “independent” and isolated writing programs?

FORWARD: DISSERTATING THE FUTURE OF THE PROFESSION

Tracing how graduate students receive, reinvent, and react to disciplinary transformations alters the dimension of our disciplinary narratives. An emphasis on the reception, however, not only changes the way we observe and narrate our discipline, it has the potential of altering the existing structure of our field.

Current literature on graduate studies generally focuses on three main issues: the discrepancy between graduate student training in theory and the more generalized teaching that graduate students will eventually do; the need for teachers to focus on literacy issues of our least prepared students, and the crisis in higher education and its effects on tenure-track jobs.⁹ The recent Conference on the Future of Doctoral Education centered on these issues. In the over 150 pages of material produced at that conference and reprinted in the October 2000 *PMLA*, scholars continually recommend the shrinking of graduate programs, the need for greater attention to teacher preparation, and possibilities for alternate career opportunities.¹⁰

Important as these issues are, they do not address the current conflict between the production of knowledge by graduate students and the way our programs are reshaping knowledge. To make that connection is to acknowledge that the separation of literature and writing assumes a separation of writing about something (observing and critiquing) and creating something (producing new knowledge). But segregating parts of experience from the whole of disciplinary development runs counter to the realities of writing and knowledge making. The composition of our three hybrid dissertations is not something unique to my university but is part of our changing academic culture and interconnected world. This is what Niklas Luhmann and other systems theorists mean when they refer to contemporary society as multilayered. Luhmann explains that our world cannot simply be described as “modern” or “postmodern” or as “expressionist” or “constructivist,” but rather as all of these things, as a “self-referential system” that “reproduces itself” through the very metalevel activities of trying to understand and place itself in this environment (42–46). The more we “progress” toward disciplinary independence, the more we come to rely on each other to change and adapt to new surroundings.

Stephen North and his collaborators acknowledge this environment in their book, *Refiguring the Ph.D. in English Studies: Writing, Doctoral Education, and the Fusion-Based Curriculum*. North writes that debates

about the field occur in “real time” (260) and cannot be put off or staffed out to disciplinary theorists. He discusses the need for “refiguring” the Ph.D. towards a “fusion curriculum” that allows for flexibility in studying and practicing “writing, teaching, and criticism.” This curriculum is an important contribution to the recognition that the discipline cannot just recolonize; it must move forward with the time. But what is most important about North’s work in my mind is the recognition that we need to begin to make “doctoral student writing one of the primary means by which this refiguring of the Ph.D. will be brought” (260). I would add to that: we need to acknowledge the ways doctoral students are already restructuring the academy through knowledge making that integrates experiential observation, literary critique, and rhetorical and systematic analysis of knowledge production.

Composition studies can lead the way to making the connection between observation of change and its production. As the “teaching subject,” to use Joseph Harris’s phrase, composition has always been interested in the process of constructing texts. But we now need to focus on the process and products of disciplinary change. This change does not just happen in the space of one institution during one semester or within the margins of volumes such as these. It occurs in the material products gathered together—ever increasingly together—from a broken field of dreams.

NOTES

1. The two genres of disciplinary discourse I describe here—the apocalyptic crisis narrative and the progressive tale—dominate much of the recent disciplinary literature. “The rise and fall of English” is Robert Scholes’s phrase, taken from the title of his recent book. “Crisis and panacea” is Robert Connors’s phrase, and I borrow “conflict and revision” from Gerald Graff’s book, *Beyond the Culture Wars*. Other related books, written by scholars representing every field of English and composition include Bernard Bergonzi’s *Exploding English*, Christine Farris and Chris M. Anson’s collection, *Under Construction*, Alvin Kernan’s *What’s Happened to the Humanities?* and Mary Poovey’s “Beyond the Current Impasse in English Studies.”
2. I am referring to Jauss’s *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutic* and Iser’s *The Fictive and the Imaginary*. For a discussion of reader-response

- and reception theory in terms of the history of literary criticism, see Terry Eagleton, 54–91.
3. Process theorists have integrated some of the reader-response techniques into their work on revision. I take the phrase “movies of the mind” from Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff’s textbook, *A Community of Writers*.
 4. The bios, memos, and statements from graduate students are all taken from unpublished documents or from the author’s personal notes.
 5. See, for just two examples, Elbow and Belanoff, *Community of Writers*, and Elbow and Belanoff, “State University of New York: Portfolio-Based Evaluation Program.”
 6. Avrom Fleishman discusses the low morale in light of the theory debates in “The Condition of English: Taking Stock in a Time of Culture Wars.” See also Michael Bérubé’s *Public Access* (“Introduction”).
 7. See Farris and Anson’s introduction to *Under Construction*, which discusses the progress of and public support for composition in the last decade. J. Hillis Miller’s foreword to *Publishing in Rhetoric and Composition* discusses composition’s growth in connection with literary studies’ decline.
 8. When I left the English department in the summer of 2000, the new curriculum in the writing program was focusing more on writing in the disciplines and away from a process-oriented approach to composition. A new writing center director has been hired as well as new associate director of writing. Such brief remarks don’t address the more substantive changes in the program; my point here is to suggest that the quick structural reformations had long-term ramifications on the work of graduate students.
 9. The *ADE Bulletins* from Winter 1990, Spring 1995, and Winter 1998 include discussions on these issues. See Graubard’s essay in *Daedalus*, which is devoted to disciplinary change. See also Michael Bérubé’s *The Employment of English* and Robert Scholes’s *The Rise and Fall of English*.
 10. Jacqueline Jones Royster’s talk from the April 1999 Conference on Doctoral Education, reprinted in the October 2000 *PMLA*, discusses this issue. Ten years earlier scholars were saying much the same thing, as reported in Lunsford, Moglen, and Slevin’s *The Future of Doctoral Studies in English*.