



#3.1

2012

ISSN 2161-0010

Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature

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Graduate School and a Community of Writers

December 2012

Recently, I attended a lunch at which several tenured faculty members from across campus spent time discussing their teaching. The consensus reached was that the current model of education — the Tier One push at the University of Houston — is based much too strongly on developing *graduate* programs in such a way that the teaching of undergraduates gets lost. This group of faculty, who were particularly concerned with teaching, saw undergraduates being harmed by the push towards research and the granting of graduate degrees. This has been, of course, a truism of education under the German model of the university since long before a “Tier One push,” which places more focus on the university as a research institution than as a place for undergraduate education. Before concerns over becoming Tier One, German university model’s focus on individual scholarship has uneasily “piggybacked” on undergraduate colleges and led to generations of faculty with no real training in pedagogy (Connors 59).

But what made me have to laugh about this observation about graduate programs was the focus on *programs*. No one talked about a focus on graduate *students*. No one even mentioned graduate students at all in the course of a discussion that concerned them greatly, both as students, who could also benefit from faculty who are better prepared to teach, and as teachers themselves, who actually do a great deal of the work of undergraduate education. Graduate students — the actual, physical people — were erased from this discussion in *both* of the roles they fill in the university. This kind of erasure isn’t indicative of a failing on the part of these faculty, though, so much as a demonstration of the larger power issues at work in the university.

It’s easy to forget how much labor TAs, along with other contingent workers, do within the university English Department, primarily in the teaching of First Year Writing (FYW). James Slevin has suggested that the ease with which we forget this is not an accident, and is rather a function built into the discourse of the university. Examining the college catalogue for English classes, he finds that the FYW courses are generally found under a single listing despite the fact that “roughly 70 percent of the postsecondary English classes or sections taught in this country are composition classes” (Slevin 5). This holds true for the UH English Department site as well,

where the Spring 2013 course list on the English website shows a single listing for “English 1304,” while the course catalogue shows 68 sections available for registration. The prevalence of the course in the department — which is where the majority of TA labor in Spring 2013 will take place — is erased from the website in order to highlight the comparatively fewer literature classes being offered at the sophomore level and the even smaller number of upper division courses available. Similarly, the instructor for each of the FYW sections is currently listed as “Staff” or under the name of the Director of Lower Division Studies; the names of the TAs, adjuncts, and few tenure track faculty teaching these courses are not visible to students selecting courses. The argument here is not that the university or the department is purposefully engaging in practices that devalue the work of TAs; the argument, rather, is that the power structures in place do so automatically. Rather than a tool wielded by a single authority figure, power here is a relation which always exists unequally between people and groups, especially in a hierarchical institution like the university. Recognizing the values encoded in the course catalogue — and the power structures it reveals — is an important step not just for the discipline of rhetoric and composition (Slevin’s goal) but an important step in thinking about the power structures that govern graduate students’ experiences with the university, with the department, with faculty, and with their students.

Part of what is interesting about the position of graduate student TAs is the position of liminality in which the graduate student is *both* student and teacher. The problem that I see, though, is that institutional forces erase graduate students at both ends of this spectrum. If graduate students are often ignored as laborers in the university, they are just as frequently ignored as *students*. As much as graduate programs are understood to be important, there’s relatively little focus on teaching graduate students with any of the best practices of education. Sally Barr Ebest has noted that faculty strongly resist suggestions that teaching practices in graduate education should resemble those in undergraduate classrooms, which has left graduate teaching — and especially teaching graduate writing — undertheorized. I see the effects of this on a daily basis when I meet with graduate students in the UH Writing Center, particularly those working on their theses or dissertations. Several graduate students have come to me with frustratingly vague faculty and advisor comments about their inadequacies as students and writers, making it clear that graduate education is often more closely aligned with gatekeeping than with pedagogy. Graduate work, especially the work of writing, is assumed to be a solitary journey, and students who fall behind are made to feel personally responsible rather than victims of a system that doesn’t work for them. This model of education serves to erase graduate students as students, allowing faculty to think about graduate *programs* instead of people.

Both elements of erasure at work in the university — erasure as workers and erasure as students — are important to theorize, discuss, and hopefully change. It’s not easy to do, though, and I think there are several reasons for this. One is that we tend to think about graduate school as an apprenticeship model, in which the labor performed by graduate students is part of the learning process. This makes it difficult to talk seriously about the labor conditions (growing class sizes, stagnant fellowship awards, increasing fees that are not covered by those awards) because those conditions are part of the education. Marc Bousquet makes it very clear, though, that graduate student labor is a key condition in determining the labor market in the rest of the university, and is therefore something that needs to be problematized by anyone concerned with the shrinking

number of tenure track jobs. I also see a tendency among theorists to ignore the liminality or dual role of graduate students in order to focus more simply on the educational needs (as Ebest does) or on the labor conditions (as Bousquet and Slevin do). I think that any discussion of graduate education and labor has to hold the dual roles of graduate students in mind — to ignore one aspect in favor of the other is to participate in the project of erasure.

One of the most important ways to start re-theorizing education in a way that doesn't erase graduate students is to work against the solitary model of graduate education. This is the primary reason we started *Plaza* as a place to share our work with each other. In grad school, we spend much of our lives writing papers on topics that are not going to become dissertation chapters or nationally published essays, and these kinds of papers are usually written only for our professors and then forgotten about as Fall becomes Spring. This is part of the way that our work as students — and the work that goes into a seminar paper accounts something like seventy-five hours of a semester — is erased. At *Plaza*, we believe that writing is a social activity, one that is enriched by the possibility of revision and comment by our peers, and we hope that by creating a space to share our writing that we encourage graduate students to claim a voice within an institution that otherwise tends to erase them.

In addition to those who submitted papers to issue 3.1 of *Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature*, I'd like to thank the editorial board:

- Bruce Martin
- Geneva Canino
- Jessica Casteel
- Chris Varela
- Amanda Rudd
- Caitlin Brenner

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Editor, *Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature*

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