Centers and Peripheries

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> Perception of an object costs
> Precise the Object's loss—
> Perception in itself a Gain
> Replying to its Price—
>
> The Object Absolute—is nought—
> Perception sets it fair
> And then upbraids a Perfectness
> That situates so far—
>
> —Emily Dickinson (1960: 486-87)

This special issue is dedicated to exploring the opportunities and demands of teaching and learning in small college departments. We begin with the idea that the small college department offers generative conditions for teaching and curriculum development—as well as opportunities to integrate the professional activities of reading, writing and teaching. Historically, small college departments have been like microclimates in the profession, fostering some of the most lasting changes in English studies. Today small college departments are centers of intellectual ambition and innovation, places where faculty interest, expertise and creative activity directly shape the experience of undergraduate students. In smaller institutions and departments, faculty and students routinely work together in collaborative and cooperative endeavors—introducing students to the discipline as well as helping them locate the discipline in a larger intellectual context. It is the small size of our communities that continually invites us to envision our scholarly and creative activities as both an inspiration for, and an extension of, our work

with undergraduate students. In fact, our ongoing pursuit of a complementary relationship between teaching and scholarship, while never easy, has generated ways of thinking about intellectual work that might serve the profession at large. We offer this special issue, then, both to investigate what might be possible in the small college department as well as to suggest how these possibilities might inspire comparable intellectual work in other professional and institutional contexts.

Visibility and Value

The impulse to make visible the intellectual conditions for teaching and learning in small college departments has been present in the profession since at least the mid 1990s. Each year, at the Modern Language Association Convention, the MLA Office of English Programs sponsors annual sessions on the small college department—exploring issues such as balancing teaching and scholarship, collegiality, generalism, professional identity, curriculum and teaching conditions, tenure and promotion. The irony of these gatherings is that most of the people who attend are members of small college departments—and hence the conversation about the intellectual work of small-college faculty and students is visible only to those who were doing it. In remarks that might be said to have garnered broader attention, Nona Fienberg's "The Most of It: Hiring at a Non-Elite College" (1996) took the occasion of the so-called crisis in the job market to highlight the real differences between the desires and values of the research institution and the challenges of new faculty finding themselves in departments and institutions whose primary mission is teaching. And in what would become a much-discussed essay on a phenomenon he called "preprofessionalism," John Guillory (1996: 91), called attention to the relationship between the job crisis and the "desires invested by graduate

students in the profession of literary study." The same year, the MLA Commission on Professional Service released the report "Making Faculty Work Visible: Reinterpreting Professional Service, Teaching, and Research in the Fields of Language and Literature" (1996), a document that explored the sites and dimensions of academic work in an ambitious attempt to rethink the contexts of faculty work.

John Kronick's (1997) elaboration of the problematic relationship between publication and teaching—and the academic commonplaces that perpetuate a system that oddly devalues the intellectual work of learning—explain in part why such searching analyses of the profession seem to have little effect on the way the members of the profession represent their work.**1** In retrospect, the opportunity to use the job crisis as an occasion, as Guillory (1996: 97) put it, to inquire into "the modes of professionalization we have internalized in our practice," has been mostly a peripheral conversation among a minority invested in making visible the nature of work in small college departments. Essays by Donald E. Hall (1998) and David R. Evans (1998), for example, focus on the different worldviews of the graduate school and the small college department, and offer their suggestions for making the transition (and surviving the demands) of what they call teaching-oriented schools.**2**

This conversation about teaching in the small college department in *Profession* centers not merely around *making visible* conditions for teaching and learning but *valuing* those conditions. Whereas larger departments are mostly organized around a general curriculum and faculty specialization, smaller departments, as Wendy Moffat (2003:11) explains, "recognize that the shape of the curriculum is determined in large measure by the interests and expertise of the departments' teachers." The practice of English in

smaller departments—situated in schools with primarily undergraduate students—is often quite different; and these departments are always susceptible to change. For just as small college departments can stagnate, a retirement or two, or a new tenure-track line, can lead to a sudden onset of change. Too, one learns in small college departments that thoughtful and timely intervention can lead to lasting changes—and often for the better.

As someone intimately familiar with the practices and values of a research-oriented institution, Kathleen McCormick (2003: 50) encourages members of the profession to think beyond what seem to be "the more obvious advantages of working in a Research 1 institution and focus on what has the potential to get lost—for both faculty members and students—in working in an environment that does not see undergraduate education as its first priority." Words like these carry resonance for many of us who teach in smaller settings. Many of us have learned, with McCormick, that "we can't wallow in feeling demoralized by our undergraduates. We have to create to change." We invest more time and more energy to improve the conditions for learning and teaching precisely because our primary professional focus is on the education of undergraduate students. "We put our faith in our undergraduates and in our ability as teachers," McCormick concludes. As many of us have asked at one point or another, what other option do we have?

Rethinking the Center

Still, it is worth asking, why is it that this thoughtful and ongoing conversation about the intellectual work in small college departments has not refocused more members of the profession on the contexts in which we profess? And why is it that the dominant professional desires and intellectual values continue to locate the majority of teaching-oriented institutions on the periphery—places where faculty presumably must teach more

classes, publish fewer books and essays, and struggle to remain in touch with their professional colleagues?

One answer is that since the late 1960s the research university has defined the relative value of faculty work in terms of research, teaching and service. Most faculty have in turn quite naturally come to see research and publication, as well as mentoring graduate students, as their primary work. However in a report in *Change*, Jerry Gaff and Leo Lambert (1996: 38) point out that while "102 universities produce 80 percent of all U.S. doctoral degrees awarded annually. . . the majority of 'hiring' institutions—liberal arts colleges of varying selectivity, comprehensive universities of different sizes, technical and community colleges, and other special colleges— ... have missions, values, cultures, and conceptions of faculty roles and responsibilities far different from those of doctorate-granting research universities." But once again, in spite of the evidence that we need to broaden the professional perspectives of graduate students, most new PhDs have internalized through research-oriented training a professional identity organized around writing and publication.**3** As increasing publication demands have been internalized and then practiced in a range of institutional types, the privileging of scholarship over teaching has led professors to turn their attention away from the classroom—especially the classrooms of undergraduate students.

This feature of our professional discourse has been raised time and again. George Levine (2001: 17), in the inaugural issue of this journal, imagined a utopia with a reward system that would reflect a "professionwide commitment to the seriousness of teaching."**4** Robert Scholes (2003: 12) argues a stronger case, for the possibility that, in his words, the "prevailing notion of research does not suit us, [for] it intervenes to disrupt

the relation between learning and teaching that is proper to humanistic study." Many who teach in departments and institutions less subject to this reductive version of intellectual work will surely welcome such comments from a scholar-teacher like Scholes—whose writing about teaching and learning has refocused attention on the undergraduate students we teach.

And yet in his recent essay "How Scholars Read," John Guillory (2008) demonstrates how these intellectual values have become inseparable from the disciplinary practices of reading and writing. He traces the genealogy of scholarly reading habits in a bureaucratically organized system of scholarship—a system in which the demand for quantity supplants an expectation of quality when the function of scholarly writing is to measure productivity. But the "greater harm in the proliferation of unread or casually read scholarship," Guillory continues, "is the devaluation of teaching, both as the means for transmission of long-standing knowledge and as the first venue for disseminating new knowledge" (17). He then observes that it might make sense to ask the obvious question: "Would it perhaps be healthier in some ways if we scholars taught more and wrote less?" Yet when Guillory has put forth this "immodest proposal" to colleagues he has been "greeted with the stunned silence reserved for the most intolerable social impropriety." This stunned silence and discomfort aligns with the somewhat unsettling fact in the "MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion" (2006: 29-30) that over 60 percent of all departments surveyed "report that publication has increased in importance in tenure decisions over the last 10 years." Indeed the percentage of departments valuing research above teaching had risen from 35.4 percent to 75.7 percent since 1968. The desire to claim more time to think and write as members of our

disciplinary communities, or so it would appear, continues to flow *from* the larger research-oriented institutions currently structured to sustain cultures committed to the priority of scholarship *to* smaller institutions and departments structured around undergraduate education**.**

Speaking from the Periphery

Our profession continues to perpetuate a surprisingly parochial discourse that situates the research institution at the center of intellectual production, value and prestige. This spatial configuration obscures the realities of a complex system of postsecondary and secondary education made up of four-year liberal arts and comprehensive colleges, community colleges, two-year colleges and public as well as private universities. The larger problem, however, is that this discourse defers the inevitability that, in one way or another, we confront the challenge of the negotiation of this multiplicity.**5** For better or worse (mostly worse), the view of an academic career outside the research-oriented university remains embedded in a fiction about our professional life. The consequence is that, for better or worse (again, mostly worse), too many graduate students, among those fortunate enough to find a job, struggle to adapt to the demands and expectations of a foreign intellectual culture. As Ed Folsom (2000: 9) bluntly puts it, the graduate-school version of being a research professor too often creates a situation in which new PhDs develop a "sense of a career that is in decline before it even begins."

This special issue of *Pedagogy* offers a different place to begin. We set out with the simple idea that if the current-traditional conception of the discipline has rendered a great deal of the work of the profession invisible, then it would make sense to talk more about what our colleagues are actually doing outside the doctorate-granting institution.

The authors in this special issue demonstrate how their intellectual lives have been shaped by where they teach. Refusing to accept the limitations of working on the periphery of the profession, these authors have found (and, in many cases, created) vibrant centers of intellectual life. Small college faculty have learned to improvise, using the dominant discourse of the profession, by fashioning effective ways of teaching, building curricula; and they have created opportunities for valuing collaboration and balancing the demands of reading, writing and teaching.

We can learn from these stories. For these narratives can help us to deconstruct the dominant professional discourse that locates the research institution at the center and all others institutions on the periphery. In his smart and spirited response to the recently released "MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion," Dana Ringuette (2008) offers an example of this kind of critical work. He points out that the summary recommendations of the Task Force will be read quite differently by those who work in departments doing the very things the Task Force recommends. At my institution, to take one example, we have aligned our standards for faculty evaluation with the mission, values and practices of our institution; we have therefore long abandoned the reductive conflation of scholarship with publication; we have revised our standards for promotion and tenure to reflect the intellectual work our faculty do; our standards for promotion and tenure are published and visible to junior faculty; we conduct faculty evaluation without depending upon the judgment of presses or outside evaluators; we value teaching and service in both promotion and tenure reviews; and we value collaborative intellectual work as a contribution to the profession as well as the to the public that supports our work.

But if we accept that standards and practices differ across institutional missions and types, how do we break from the ways of thinking that marginalize these differences? Ringuette tenders a simple and sensible proposal: a more searching and inclusive conversation of “what it means to be primarily a teacher in a community of research, writing, and scholarly exchange” (190). Consider how most of us think about the two-year college, for example. Reread Mark Reynolds’s (1998: 37) essay “The Intellectual Work of Two-Year-College Teaching,” published in *The ADE Bulletin,* that begins by saying that some who read his title will undoubtedly “think they have encountered a good oxymoron, finding ‘intellectual’ and ‘two-year college’ in the same context.” Go back and read our Roundtable review of *The Profession of English in the Two-Year College,* edited by Reynolds and Sylvia Holladay-Hicks (2005); or revisit the spirited Commentary “In the Land of Cited” (2006: 402), in which Howard Tinberg questions the failure to represent in our professional discourse a substantial percentage of its members, arguing that “until the work of the ‘other half’ of our profession is read and recognized, any talk of border crossing is at best premature and at worst an illusion.”

Representing more fully what we do will require us to move beyond general claims for teaching as a form of scholarship and decontextualized arguments about the value of teaching. Instead we need to shift our focus to the local histories of institutions where we can learn what the profession is doing beyond our inevitably parochial point of view. In fact, I have chosen the essays in this special issue of *Pedagogy* in part to represent the range of institutions that fall within the category of the small college department. The contributors to this special issue represent two private, selective institutions, Macalester College and Dickinson College; the University of North Carolina

Asheville, a public liberal arts college; a Christian liberal arts institution, Wheaton College; a branch campus of a large state system, SUNY Purchase; and a comprehensive Catholic institution, Marywood University. These institutions differ in how they determine, among other things, how faculty organize their time in the office and classroom, the nature of their interactions with students, and their collaborations with colleagues beyond their home departments; they show how the size of a department (and its particular configuration) significantly impacts the organization of the curriculum, as well as the courses faculty teach; and, because the curriculum is in part structured around whether faculty teach undergraduate and/or graduate students, as well as teaching loads and assignments, these local conditions have everything to do with how faculty think about their professional lives.

The opening sentence of Wendy Moffat's essay "Innovation and Collaboration in the Small College Department" articulates a warrant for the arguments in all of the essays that follow. "Size matters."**5** As Moffat explains, while small is a relative term, it is also true that small college department faculty must rely on one another—to collaborate, or *labor together*—in an ongoing improvisation amid the onrush of competing demands on one's time. Demands and time are at the core of Margaret Downes's assessment of the teaching conditions of the public liberal arts college—an institutional category that encompasses a range of colleges whose missions and values reflect their commitments to the liberal arts and their role as state-supported public institutions. "'Enough! Or too much': The Blakean Paradox of the COPLAC English Department" offers a view of small college departments as potential models of community, where a delicate but

necessary sense of ownership underlies the ongoing cycle of contraries that characterize the kind of struggle and progression we experience every day.

Of course an exclusive focus on size can obscure the significant similarities—between research- and teaching-oriented institutions, or among institutions of similar mission and size. These complexities of categorization are palpable in Jeffry C. Davis' "A Profession of Blended Beliefs: English at a Christian Liberal Arts College." Davis explores the place of the small Christian liberal arts college in the predominantly secular guild of English studies. Davis calls on the words of Wayne Booth to explore the place of stories in our professional lives—both as a gathering place for acknowledging the pluralism of our intellectual communities and for generating a rhetoric of justification for the humanities. A profession of blended beliefs is alive in the personal narrative of Stuart Y. McDougal, whose "The Remaking of a Small College English Department" traces a distinguished professor's move from the University of Michigan to Macalester College in Minnesota. McDougal's experiences creating a new department at Macalester highlights the risks and the opportunities of building a department in which the humanities are at the intellectual center of the life of a highly selective college that maintains high standards for both scholarship and teaching.

Kathleen McCormick also speaks from her experiences at research- and teaching-intensive institutions. Her co-written essay "Here Comes Everybody: An Epistemic and Inclusive Approach to Teaching *Ulysses"* describes an innovative and labor-intensive pedagogy focused on student learning. McCormick and her former student and co-author Melissa Shofner tell the story of a classroom on James Joyce that makes of use of George Hillocks's epistemic classroom. Their dialogic narrative elaborates in detail the

possibilities for extending the scope and intensity of a classroom focused on self-motivated student inquiry. Finally, William Conlogue's essay,"Where I Teach," offers an account of the changing conditions for teaching and learning in a small college department. Conlogue's narrative chronicles the incremental changes in the faculty and curriculum as a small college department becomes a small university department.

Towards a Discourse of Eccentricity

Working on this special issue had led me to a modest recommendation: we need to be a little more eccentric. A more eccentric perspective on teaching and learning would ask us to see our profession as more than the institutions where we read, write and teach. Our eccentric perspectives would help us to imagine the complexities and complications of other programs and institutions, as well as open us to imagining forms of intellectual work that differ from our own. What we would gain would be the capacity to really value the work of others as part of our common intellectual work.

A discourse of eccentricity would reconfigure every college and university as one among many institutional types, with necessarily different conditions for scholarship and teaching. Acknowledging and valuing difference—here in terms of institutional mission and size—would establish multiple centers, and consequently margins, from which to speak.**6** Further valuing institutional difference would in turn enrich our common sense of purpose and offer pathways to alternative pedagogical innovations, curricula, and definitions of faculty work. Our professional discourse might then incline more towards intellectual engagement and collaboration rather than isolation and separation. What if we were to consider gathering perspectives from other institutional sites in subsequent issues of this journal? It would be instructive, for example, to bring together essays on teaching

from those who professional lives are determined by the mission and values of the research institution. It would be interesting, too, for *Pedagogy* to organize a special issue on the community college, the comprehensive university or the two-year college.

But for now, in this issue, we will think small. One of my hopes is that this special issue will make a contribution to and understanding of the discipline and the ways we practice the disciplinary activities of reading, writing and teaching. I also hope that our modest gesture might lead to more challenging questions about the integrity of our intellectual work. What might it mean to place teaching at the center of our intellectual lives? How might we conceptualize teaching as the enabling condition of faculty work? What possibilities emerge in genuinely understanding English studies as a discipline, and as a profession, with the research university as one among many centers where teaching and learning take place?

Notes

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1. “The interdependence between publication and teaching is easy to proclaim but difficult to determine,” observes Kronik (1997: 161). “So let’s confess why we publish. We publish partly because the system assumes that we will and because if we want to get ahead—or in some cases keep our jobs—we have to. We publish partly because of human frailty and vanity, because it feeds our egos to see out names in print, and as we rush to our colleagues’ footnotes and indexes and bibliographies in pursuit of our

legitimation, we forget that only a minimal percentage of work in the humanities is ever cited and that even that fraction is ever so ephemeral, quickly superseeded."

2. See Botshon and Senier (2000) for a thoughtful response to Hall and Evans as well as Hall's and Evans's "Responses to Lisa Botshon and Siobhan Senier" (2000).

3. For a brief but useful historical overview of changing requirements for tenure and promotion see the "The Final Report of the MLA Committee on Professional Employment." The Report (2007: 36-37). calls attention to what the authors call a troubling "disparity between the expectations and assumptions about college teaching that most graduate programs inculcate in their PhD candidates and the actual work most of those candidates will do once they leave the research-oriented PhD-granting institutions where most of them have studied." Cheryl Glenn observes in the Report that in the United States "over 90% of English programs and most likely between one-half and two-thirds of the total number of professorial-rank appointments are located outside doctorate-granting research institutions." In turn, graduate students imagine their identities as teachers and scholars by absorbing a narrative of professional success that is at odds with the mission and values of hiring institutions. For a clear expression of the difficulties of moving from the graduate school to teaching institutions, and aligning individual and institutional expectations, see Botshon and Senier (2000).

4. In his recent "Presidential Address 2008", Gerry Graff (2009: 728) asks that we move beyond the familiar argument that teaching is not valued and make the case that "the way we *think about* teaching needs to change." One such change would be to examine more carefully what Marshall Gregory (2008: 121) calls the "powerful instinct to conflate good teaching and a maximum coverage of disciplinary knowledge." Both Graf and Gregory affirm the importance of scholarly work and the significance of disciplinary knowledge. But they are less confortable with the ways of thinking about teaching that follow. "The confused notion that most of teaching is wrapped up in how well one knows one's materials," writes Gregory, "is a pernicious influence on undergraduate education, and new teachers need to become unconfused about it before they can become effective."

5. Recognizing this hierarchy of value in their own classifications of doctoral, masters, baccalaureate institutions, the Carnegie Foundation (2009) recently revised its classifications to acknowledge the size of an institution. Carnegie recognizes the doctoral, masters and baccalaureate institutional categories reinforce the fiction that the best academic jobs are in larger doctorate-granting institutions where research and publication is the primary focus, and where working conditions are organized to help individuals pursue scholarly projects in specialized fields of inquiry. They name size as "probably the most influential omitted variable in the 1970 classification framework."

6. The argument that institutional placement determines one's experiences and perspectives has become more prevalent in recent years. For instance, Emily Isaacs's argument in "Teaching General Education Writing: Is there a Place for Literature" (2009) is directed primarily toward faculty and curricula at comparable comprehensive universities. She concludes, astutely, that arguments "based on one's experiences and

observations are necessarily influenced by institutional placement, [and that] it is time that we observe the fact that most of the arguments about divorcing English and giving up on collaborating with literature faculty on first-year writing courses are made by individuals at research institutions" (116). This kind of awareness is precisely how we should be thinking about the issues that concern us—whether specific methods and practices of interdisciplinary courses, for example, or broader issues such as the relation between teaching and scholarship. For a recent collection of essays that takes as its subject diverse perspectives on institutional placement, see Murphy (2008).

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