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The MA in Writing at DePaul University

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While discussion about the nature and function of the PhD has flourished for years in the broad context of English studies (Bérubé; Lunsford et al.; Nelson) and for more than a decade now in rhetoric and composition (Brown, Meyer, and Enos; North; Young and Steinberg), the Master's degree has attracted scant attention. Other than "The 2004 Survey of MA Programs in Rhetoric and Composition Studies," whose editors lament their own "inadequate data set" (Brown, Torres, Enos, and Juergensmeyer 8), the Master's has not figured in our discipline's relentless self-reflection. No doubt this traces to a continuing concern with disciplinary viability and to the awareness that recognition is dependent on a robust collection of programs offering the terminal degree. The MA in English or any of its subfields, as is true of the same degree in various disciplines, is framed almost exclusively in its relation to the terminal PhD (Dalbey; Wright; Gaylord; Duyfhuizen).

The assumption that MA coursework has value to the extent that it prepares students adequately for doctoral study appears so well entrenched that how it does so in curricular terms escapes scholarly interest. The Program Profile feature in *Composition Forum*, however, offers an excellent venue to begin consideration of just how the Master's degree functions dually, both preparing students for PhD study as well as working in support of the dynamic cluster of interests that circulate around the term *writing* in the academy. Lacking a significant number of well-established undergraduate programs in rhetoric and composition, doctoral programs in our discipline—unlike their counterparts in literature—will continue to value the Master's as a locus of theoretical and historical academic training. However, to constrain our understanding of the MA to its role in "feeding" the PhD is to miss or ignore manifold ways in which our theoretical and pedagogical knowledge can prepare writers for lives outside the academy. We have much to offer these students in the way of preparation for an active rhetorical life at work and in various public spheres.

Our intention here, in dialoguing about the MA in Writing program at DePaul University, in which Peter currently teaches and Jen was a student from 1999-2001, is in part to draw attention to Master's programs as vibrant sites of anti/inter/disciplinary potential. In departments where the MA is the highest degree offered—such as the English department at DePaul—MA programs typically function with a "vocational" or "professional" mission (Steward); they attract many students who return to school motivated not by a desire to engage in research practices and scholarly argument, but an intention to move efficiently through a credentialing process that will better position them in careers. When these students decide at some point during their MA programs to turn their attention for the first time toward the PhD—as Jen did during her time at DePaul—their stories have much to teach us about the appeal and potential of our work as it plays out in sites quite different from our familiar locales, the first-year writing classroom and the doctoral seminar.

Program Description

The Master of Arts in Writing program at DePaul exemplifies, in capsule form, the curricular variety Brown et al. find reflected in their survey (9). Like many programs at all levels, the MWR (as it is identified in the course schedule and other program documents) was born of circumstance rather than heavily theorized design; the degree's current concentrations—Writing Theory and Pedagogy, Technical and Professional Writing, and Literary Writing (by which we mean *creative* writing)—are the legacy of interests represented by faculty in residence at the time of the program's formation in the very late 1980s. It isn't clear whether the rationale for collecting such a broad set of interests was in place in the beginning or has evolved over time, but the program continues to point to the multiplicity of courses drawn together under the rubric of *writing* as both the MWR's strength and its point of differentiation from other field-specific programs, such as those in Technical Writing or the MFA. The three concentrations have undergone name changes, and they have expanded and evolved with the professional discourses that inform them and the specializations of faculty who teach in them. What has changed little, however, is a rigorous academic core that is expected to ground the concentrations—a task that has become increasingly unwieldy through the hiring of more and more faculty who, as might be expected, exhibit stronger allegiance to their areas of specialization than to the project of a unified "writing studies" program.

These new faculty members have been necessary because of the program's steady growth, enabled by the collection of creative writing, rhetoric and composition, and professional and technical writing in one program.

Approximately 180 students took courses in the program during 2005-06, and the program graduates about 40 students per year. Curiously, the program keeps no formal record of the number of students who pursue each concentration, but those in the Writing Theory and Pedagogy concentration is estimated to be between 1/4 and 1/3 of the total.

Regardless of concentration, students complete two courses in the Language and Style Core and two courses in the Rhetoric and Composition Core. The obligation to "pick two" from among the second group—"Classical Rhetoric, Renaissance and 18th Century Rhetoric," "Modern [Contemporary] Rhetoric," and "Composition Theory"—has frustrated many an aspiring student poet. The creative writing faculty members are equally uncomfortable with the notion that rhetoric and/or composition ever could function to organize or explain what they do.{Note 1}These core courses, however, constitute a thick and rigorous introduction to the discipline that informs postsecondary writing instruction and theory. (Indeed, many PhD-granting departments would be envious of our three-course sequence in the history of rhetoric.) The program core is taught almost exclusively by faculty in rhetoric and composition, who comprise by far the largest number of faculty in the program, and the need to staff core courses with well-trained faculty who have dissertations and research agendas in the discipline has tended to drive hiring decisions. The program uses non-tenure-track faculty only in the fiction and non-fiction classes in the Literary Writing concentration. As a result, there is little question that the program best serves those students concentrating in Writing Theory and Pedagogy. The core courses are augmented by electives including "Multicultural Rhetorics," "Teaching Writing," "Teaching Writing Online," and courses cross-listed with the dynamic MA in New Media Studies program, such as "Text and Image," "Multimedia Documentary I and II," and others. (For a complete list of MWR courses, see Appendix.)

Degree Requirements

Core requirements: Successful completion of*four* core courses, two selected from each of the following core areas:

1. *Language and Style Core*
   - History of English Prose Style
   - Stylistics
   - Structure of Modern English
   - The Essay: History, Theory & Practice

2. *Rhetoric and Composition Core*
   - History of Rhetoric I: Classical Rhetoric
   - History of Rhetoric II: Renaissance & 18th Century Rhetoric
   - History of Rhetoric III: Modern Rhetoric
   - Composition Theory

Major Concentration: Successful completion of*four* courses in one of the following concentrations:

- Technical and Professional Writing
- Literary [Creative] Writing
- Writing Theory and Pedagogy

Students who choose to exercise the Thesis Option may take Thesis Research in lieu of one elective.

Locating the MWR

Jen:

The notion of a Master's program as a place for practice, observation, or testing is reflected well in my experience moving through the MA in Writing at DePaul and later into PhD work. My intention, upon entering the MWR was not PhD study; indeed, I started the program at DePaul with the aim of going into publishing and editing. I was working retail jobs at the time and imagined that a second degree would offer me a way up the class ladder. Perhaps, like most undergraduates beginning graduate study, I was drawn toward the MWR only with the felt sense that I knew I needed to pursue my attraction to words, in whatever form that took. At the same time, upon entering the program, I didn't know exactly what I hoped to do *beyond* the MWR; as a result, I chose a program that would foster diverse interests in writing without the limitations of a degree in creative writing. Like many students entering DePaul's MWR program, I had little interest or experience in teaching writing, no background in writing and rhetoric studies, and no knowledge of the discipline as a specialized field.

In my first quarter at DePaul, I took two of the required core courses in the Rhetoric and Composition core, "Composition Theory" and "History of Rhetoric III: Modern Rhetoric," in part to get them out of the way of what I imagined would be the "real focus" of my work in the MWR program—the Technical and Professional Writing concentration, with strong emphasis on the Language and Style Core. Although I remember performing only mediocrely in these first two courses (in many ways being unable at first bluff to "invent the university" for the occasion), they delivered up the palatable "good" of writing pedagogy and rhetorical theory, on which I happily fed.

These ideas—reinforcing the value of teaching and learning to write as well as the historical embeddedness of such endeavors—in many ways strengthened my assumption that higher education was practically and historically a way out and up. At the time, I was unable to reflect critically on some of the elitist attitudes that fueled my decision to change my concentration of interest to Writing Theory and Pedagogy. This track, unlike Literary or Professional Writing, gave me the courage and fledgling authority to begin to see myself as a potential "insider" by being able to "talk the talk" *about* writing while also being engaged *in* writing. Thus it served the dual function of allowing me to be a writer while also giving me the metadiscursive language with which to later critique that experience.

Looking back, it is hard to say whether or not I could have entered another MA program and taken a breadth of courses in the Literary Writing track—such as "Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir," or in the Language and Style Core, such as the "History of English Prose Style"—yet still found myself grounded in rhetoric and composition studies. Indeed, it is harder still to imagine my recently completed PhD work *not* grounded in Classical, Renaissance and 18th-century, and Modern histories of rhetoric, or complemented by courses emphasizing multiple and competing genres and discursive conventions, such as "Autobiography," "Multicultural Rhetorics," and "The Essay: History, Theory, Practice." Both the range and depth of courses about writing in the MWR program introduced me to the discipline of writing studies, as well as to the tensions located within it.

Leaving the MWR, I was prepared for some of the challenges that face an incoming PhD student, but not all. Certainly, completing the program enabled me to walk and talk like a pre-PhD in composing statements of purpose and establishing research agendas on paper. Courses in "Teaching Writing" and "Teaching Literature" enabled me to successfully navigate the separate process of application for teaching assistantships—without them, I would have had no idea what a "statement of teaching philosophy" was. Yet despite all of this preparation to *think like* a teacher-scholar, the practical classroom experience of teaching—*acting* like a teacher—was something that I had to seek out on my own at an unaffiliated institution. This, of course, was a dilemma—taking strongly practical courses in writing pedagogy and not being afforded the opportunity to use them. The MWR grounded my graduate work, true, but at the expense of further entrenching the rift between theory and practical experience.

Pete:

Historically a "teaching institution," DePaul is committed to the notion that its undergraduate students ought not be met in the classroom by graduate students. {Note 2} While the Director and Assistant Director of First-Year Writing [FYW] at DePaul have heroically wrangled a mostly shifting group of fine teachers over the years, the MA students in the Writing Theory and Pedagogy concentration are invariably better prepared, in terms of coursework and theoretical knowledge, than much of the undergraduate writing faculty; they are, however, prohibited from working as teaching assistants. This irony is probably too well entrenched to be loosened any time soon. At DePaul, FYW has operated for so long on a budget so thin in an environment so tuition dependent that virtually any proposed change is received as cost-prohibitive. This fiscal imperative—and considerable discomfort with the paradox of training writing teachers who are not allowed to teach—has encouraged the graduate writing faculty to maximize the teacher-training potential of the University Writing Center, which is under its direction. Eight graduate assistantships (a 20-hour per week commitment is compensated by a $7,000 annual stipend and full tuition remission) are assigned to the Center; the GAs are chosen from among applicants to both graduate programs in English, the MWR and the Master of Arts in English, a literature program built on a conventional field-coverage model. The GAs serve in a range of "coordinator" positions that expose them to the responsibilities of operating a writing center, as well as function as liaisons between the Writing Center and academic units beyond English. All student tutors are required to take the full-credit tutor-training course, "Writing Center Theory and Pedagogy," which is always taught by the director.

Some second-year GAs have been eligible for a modified "writing fellows" program that, through coordination with FYW, has matched them with FYW faculty; these students do the course reading, attend class, hold office hours for class-specific tutoring, and develop classroom activities in collaboration with the faculty member. They are fully integrated with all aspects of the class, but they do not assign grades.

Very recently, an "internship" program has been developed that MA students in similar relationships with Chicago-area community college writing teachers. In that students must pay the cost of a course (if they are not already graduate assistants) to, in effect, work for another institution, that they have no assurance of picking up a course at the school at which they intern, and that DePaul faculty do not supervise their work, the program is less than ideal, but it does offer an opportunity to engage college writers in classroom situations.

Jen:

Both the writing fellows and internship programs that DePaul has now established were created after I left the MWR program; a response in part, certainly, to the recognition that to truly prepare and ground prospective teacher-scholars in writing theory and pedagogy one must do more than teach classes about those subjects. Importantly, these programs seem to have emerged out of localized exigencies of the MWR program itself. The time I spent as a GA in DePaul's Writing Center, complemented by the course "Writing Center Theory and Pedagogy," gave me some of the practical experience with undergraduate writing from which I benefited later on. Yet this preparation in writing center work was perhaps too good. As I went on to query PhD-granting institutions about various facets of their programs, I found that my cultivated interest in writing centers was seen as more a liability than an asset in many of these research-based institutions, in which writing centers were relegated to student services, established under separate service-oriented departments, or staffed by undergraduates and administrative staff positions only. While the theorized practice of tutoring was priceless, the lack of this broader picture of the reception of writing center-based research interests was one that devalued the MWR experience.

Pete:

Jen's comment here is instructive for faculty in the MWR at DePaul; it is easy to see how our enthusiasm for the value and potential of writing center work—in the absence of guiding/directing explicit teaching opportunities—could well be understood by students as the projection of a solid disciplinary commitment. For a whole host of reasons, of course, writing centers simply don't factor into the preparation of many rhetoric and composition PhDs. This may not be the space to argue those circumstances, but Jen's comment does open up another significant point about MA programs in general. Unlike PhD programs in any field, which are by no means centralized yet do enjoy some degree of coherence and unity, Master's programs are much more localized constructions. Particularly at institutions without the PhD, the MA is often situated in response to the needs of the surrounding community and the vocational desires of students seeking to join those communities. The technical and professional writing concentration in the English MA at Eastern Michigan University, for example, is situated in the middle of what Marcia Dalbey calls "a sort of Midwestern Silicon Valley" (18), and functions in a symbiotic relationship there with local industry.

In contrast, the PhD tends to condition students to a disciplinary discourse significantly less tied to the local. Doctoral pedagogies that turn predominantly on what Juanita Comfort calls "canonical modeling" tend to condition PhD students toward a "conversation" that is "located" at only the highest levels of abstraction. As we have written elsewhere, disciplinary writing of the sort expected most often in doctoral seminars and modeled in monographs and anthologies most often assigned in such courses, function "by way of a national network of arbiters—editors and peer reviewers—who assure, among other things, that the particularities of a scholar's experience or observation are sufficiently generalized so as to make the point of their emergence largely inconsequential." Drawing on the work of Daniel Mahala and Jody Swilky, we suggest that radical dislocation—in the form of a successful academic job search—is often understood to be *the* mark of achievement: "The more successful one is 'in school,' the more likely one is to be employed in a location she knows little or nothing about" (Vandenberg and Clary-Lemon). Apparent in Jen's observation is an important lesson for MA faculty to foreground for all students the extent to which their programs are bound up with the local and the potential liabilities of generalizing that local knowledge.

The MA in Writing at DePaul offers prospective PhD students a wide cross-section of courses that can be considered both foundational, in the conventional sense, and ground-breaking in their attention to digital communication technologies, multimodal composition, and evolving conceptions of literacy. Perhaps the single most appealing facet of the MWR for its tenure-line faculty is the potential it offers for course development; while our colleagues in doctoral departments teach fewer courses, they tend to teach more of the same courses over and over. It is not unusual for new assistant professors in writing at DePaul to teach a topics course, grounded in their dissertation work for example, in their first year, and one or two a year thereafter. Faculty are not obligated to engage in a constant pattern of new-course preparation, but most see the value of developing topics courses related to their scholarly agendas, and this ensures that MA students, by way of their electives, are exposed to various sub-disciplinary foci.

Jen:

Being in a program whose faculty are devoted to the idea of a Master's degree—regardless of its later evolution (or not) in students' lives—was invaluable. In my time as a student in the MWR program, I was the "never a PhD"-cum-"pre-PhD." I was at the locus of the dual function of the MWR, if only for a short time—and certainly not alone in this position. As a result, faculty at DePaul had the responsibility of preparing students as writers and agents in civic life regardless of their future path, be it a credentialing ticket, or as academic preparation for further study. Despite

this fact, or perhaps because of it, I was positioned well as an inhabitant of the term *writing studies.*

As I moved on to PhD work in Rhetoric and Composition at an institution also offering the MA, I realized that my experience was unique. I was alone in having a Master's degree in writing studies; my peers came from Master's programs in literature and did not arrive with nearly the background in histories of rhetoric or theories of composition. Many of those who came to graduate work directly from the BA bemoaned their lack of status in the department. Resources such as teaching and research assistantships for MA students were often stretched thin, as was faculty attention (often MA students felt they stood in second place next to the more "valuable" PhD student). Course offerings and electives were somewhat lacking for these students as well, particularly as they stayed on to get their PhD in the program and faced similar course titles and little new courses over a span of seven to ten years. As an incoming PhD with an MA in writing studies in hand, I was not only positioned to enjoy the status and resources offered by the program I entered, but I was also positioned that way in the one I had left as well.

As we've sat down to compose this profile, it strikes me that DePaul has undergone some extreme changes in both its approach to, and outcomes of, the MWR. Students entering the MWR today might have experiences that differ markedly from my own. As a 2001 MWR graduate, I had the opportunity to work with many of DePaul's senior writing faculty and, as a result, made lasting collegial relationships (this project being one of the outcomes of such a friendship). Two of those faculty members have since left and, I imagine, not without impact on the program and future graduates of the MWR.

Pete:

A small number of significant structural and ideological challenges stand in the way of the program's healthy evolution. Four tenure-track faculty members with dissertations in rhetoric and composition have left the English department in the last two years, three of them senior scholars of significant reputation. Very much a department steeped in literature, English at DePaul has entertained growth in and attention to writing studies to the extent that it has been successfully self-contained in the MWR. As of the Spring quarter of 2006, there is no WAC program, not a single required writing course in the undergraduate major, and six-course loads for directorships such as the Writing Center and FYW. A kind of affable indifference to the potential for writing and of writing faculty has sharply limited the options for the continuing professional development of senior faculty in writing. These conditions forecast a continuing power imbalance that will limit the potential to hire at the senior level, slow development of the MWR, and sharply constrain the influence of writing faculty in the department and beyond.

It is unlikely that MA students—feeling their way around the contours of the discipline for the first time—will recognize the gaps created by the loss of senior faculty. And these changes can have an invigorating effect on new faculty, who perceive additional headroom and much promise in the decision to replace those who have left, if only at the assistant professor level. Other constraints have more immediate effects and are more sharply visible to students. Class size is enormous—up to 30 in the core classes—which seriously limits various pedagogical options, most obviously process-based writing and well-supervised "independent" research projects. Further, during at least one quarter per year a given faculty member may be struggling to keep up with 80-90 students on a three-course schedule; this heavy load leads many faculty to avoid supervision of ENG 500, "Independent Study" and to outright discourage students from writing theses, direction of which is entirely uncompensated. Although the vast majority of MWR grads leave DePaul without considerable experience developing lengthy works of research or analysis, this does not appear to have had a devastating effect on doctoral program placement for those students concentrating in Writing Theory and Pedagogy. All six students for whom I wrote letters of recommendation in 2005-06 received fellowship or assistantship offers; none of them produced theses. All of them, however, completed courses in which extensive reading was required, and in which students demonstrated understanding by way of shorter writing assignments focused on the summary and synthesis of current scholarship.

Jen:

In many ways, the challenges that face DePaul's MWR haven't changed since 2001. Almost all of the core courses that I took there sat nearly 30 students, although many of the non-core specialized courses in Writing Theory and Pedagogy sat only twelve to fifteen. And while I was able to take part in a supervised ENG 500 "Independent Study" of my own, I was certainly unaware at the time (as students understandably are often ignorant of the Oz-like workings behind the programmatic curtain) of the uncompensated increased workload that such an undertaking required. Like many other DePaul grads, I did not pursue a thesis, although in talking to peers later on in PhD work, I learned that my choice seemed rare to them—although quite common, as Pete mentions, at DePaul. Given the resources and faculty that are available, I can't say that the thesis is really a viable option for MWR students;

however, in looking back, such a project would have proven valuable experience as I approached dissertation work.

Pete:

Most MWR grads will not immediately pursue the PhD, but take their enriched theoretical understanding into adjunct teaching, the brutal literary marketplace, Chicago's rich editing industry, and all manner of workplace writing situations whose exigencies and genres cannot be anticipated. It makes programmatic sense, then, to defer discipline-specific research methodologies to PhD programs for those who will go on to that level. This approach appears to position students well in competition for doctoral program placement, and it affords them a jump on students who bring to the PhD program a more conventional English MA or BA. DePaul MWR grads, further buffed by PhD-granting institutions, occupy choice faculty positions in doctoral programs; that group includes a recent Braddock Award winner. Many more are committed teacher-scholars and WPAs in tenure-line positions across the country.

Rereading the Past, Rewriting the Future

Jen:

DePaul's MWR program was invaluable preparation for a lifetime in the discipline of writing studies, and is a firm reminder of how MA programs can exist as strong loci of disciplinary and interdisciplinary work. As a newly-minted PhD and an assistant professor at an institution that may soon look to create its own Master's program in rhetoric, writing, and communication, I can distinguish the MWR as an operational program model for Master's programs in writing studies. Yet such a model can be interpreted only in relation to specific, local conditions. Certainly, one must take into careful consideration the context-specific choices such programs must make if they want to remain viable and successful—while trying to avoid some of the pitfalls that keep programs like the MWR from further flourishing.

Pete:

Housed in a tuition-dependent institution that has made the decision to vigorously exploit the Master's degree across all colleges in order to fund the rising cost of competition for undergraduates, the Master's in Writing program at DePaul is unlikely to wriggle free of its most pressing constraint: class size. That problem will continue to limit faculty-student involvement or, more likely, will sustain a hypercompetitive environment in which scarce faculty time is devoted primarily to the most gregarious, exceptional, or demanding students.{Note 3} And while the pace and trajectory of curricular development has been altered by faculty departures and a department for whom uncapping the potential of writing studies is not a priority, there are reasons to expect that the large group of fresh assistant professors will assure an invigorating experience for students in the Master of Arts in Writing.

Notes

1. I have written elsewhere about the relative incompatibility of faculty in creative writing and rhetoric and composition owing to differences in training, hiring, and epistemological orientation (Vandenberg). Return to text.

2. Unfortunately, this does not ensure that first-year writing at DePaul is taught by faculty trained in writing—fewer than 2% of the 2,400 students in this fall's freshman class will take Rhetoric and Composition I or II from a tenure-line faculty member. Further, high quality adjunct faculty members are routinely lost due to pedestrian wages, too-few full-time contract positions, and a pitiable retention policy. Return to text.

3. See Catherine Stimpson's article for the significance of personal attention and mentoring at the graduate level (1149). Although her suggestions are expressly for what she calls "research institutions," we believe her expanded definition of effective teaching should apply to graduate students in all programs. Return to text.

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Appendix: Complete List of MWR Course Offerings

Technical and Professional Writing

- ENG 406 Multicultural Rhetorics
- ENG 490 Writing for Magazines

- ENG 491 Science Writing
- ENG 494 Writing in the Professions
- ENG 495 Technical Writing
- ENG 496 Editing
- ENG 409 Topics in Language, Writing & Rhetoric (selected)
- ENG 509 Internship (selected)

Literary Writing

- ENG 485 Teaching Creative Writing
- ENG 487 Travel Writing
- ENG 489 Screenwriting
- ENG 490 Writing for Magazines
- ENG 491 Science Writing
- ENG 492 Writing Fiction
- ENG 494 Writing Poetry
- ENG 496 Editing
- ENG 497 Writing the Literature of Fact
- ENG 409 Topics in Language, Writing & Rhetoric (selected)
- ENG 509 Internship (selected)

Writing Theory and Pedagogy

- ENG 401 History of the English Language
- ENG 406 Multicultural Rhetorics
- ENG 474 Teaching Literature
- ENG 480 Teaching Writing
- ENG 482 Writing Center Theory and Pedagogy
- ENG 483 Composition Theory (if not used to satisfy Rhetoric/Composition core requirement)
- ENG 485 Teaching Creative Writing
- ENG 409 Topics in Language, Writing & Rhetoric (selected)
- ENG 509 Internship (selected)

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