



The Old Man and The Doctoral Program

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I am too old to be a student in this class. I know this because it's written on the faces of my Idaho State University classmates—a mix of graduate students, most of whom are still in their twenties. As I look around the room before the first seminar of my doctoral program, it dawns on me that several of my classmates don't look much different than the students I taught earlier that day in Rexburg before motoring to Pocatello for this evening class. On the other hand, I don't look much different than the professor who has just sat down at the front of the classroom and is removing a large stack of syllabi from his satchel. This recognition amplifies my outsider status. Why am I doing this, exactly?

After more than a dozen years as a technical writer, I was hired by the English department at BYU-Idaho in 2014 to teach writing classes. This was something of a dream come true for me. I very much wanted to be a college professor when I was an undergraduate majoring in English, but I was scared off by horror stories about the poor job prospects in academia. Instead, I graduated

from Utah State University in 2000 with an emphasis in professional writing and then, along with my new wife, moved to Oregon where I had landed a job writing documentation for a small software company. A year and a half later, the dot-com bubble burst and Oregon's tech economy was hit pretty hard. I found out I was getting laid off a few days after my wife and I learned that she was pregnant with our first child.

Terrified and homesick, we moved back to the Intermountain West. Within a few months, I got a job writing proposals and editing all kinds of documents at Idaho National Laboratory. During my 13 years at the place the locals call “the site,” I wrote and edited thousands of documents, got to know a host of scientists and engineers, and completed a Master's degree at Utah State in my spare time. I also published articles and essays in various magazines. When someone asked me what I did for work, I told them, “I am a writer.”

So, when I came to Rexburg to teach writing, I was ecstatic about landing my dream job and confident that I knew what I was doing. Writing was (is) my thing. I had plenty of practice to draw upon. When I felt a bit awed while speaking with colleagues who had spent years in graduate programs to earn their doctorates, I reassured myself with an internal monologue about experience being the finest teacher. That pep talk only worked for so long. A year after being hired at BYU-Idaho, I found myself feeling out of place in that first doctoral seminar at Idaho State.

I would be lying if I said the decision to go get a PhD wasn't primarily financial. As I weighed the costs and the benefits, the financial considerations were important and probably the deciding factor. I look forward to the pay increase that will come when I (finally) defend my dissertation and graduate, and I am thankful that the financial incentive to obtain a PhD was in place when I was hired.

I also know now what I didn't know then—that my doctoral work has paid for itself already by transforming my teaching and my thinking. It has provided me with the theoretical foundation to understand my own experiences

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as a writer and a teacher. That foundation has changed the way I approach learning, teaching, writing, research, and the way I consider my students' lives and experiences as scholars. In this brief article, I want to focus on two ways that my PhD experience has changed my teaching. First, it has made me rethink the way I learned to write and the way I teach writing. Second, it has crystalized the relationship between research, theory, and application for me in both literary studies and rhetoric.

Idaho State's English doctorate focuses on the "Philosophy and Teaching of English." This means that the seminars cover a broad swath of English as a discipline. While my dissertation focuses on American literature, it was a seminar experience that caused me to rethink how I taught writing.

While it's common to hear people say that university professors don't spend much time thinking about teaching, this is certainly not the case for scholars who study writing. The field of Writing Studies (or Rhetoric and Composition, as it is often called) is a discipline that is constantly assessing and discussing what works and what doesn't work when it comes to teaching writing. This focus makes sense given that universities require every student to take writing classes. In order for students to receive individualized feedback on their work, those classes need to be relatively small. As a result, most universities employ a lot of faculty and graduate students as writing teachers. Over the years, Writing Studies scholars have engaged in a vibrant and lively discourse that continues to redefine what we know and don't know about writing.

The details of this history were unknown to me prior to taking a seminar during the second year of my PhD program that focused on composition theory. My classmates and I spent the semester looking at what various scholars of writing have said about how writing is taught in university writing courses, especially general education courses. I learned that, despite my confidence in my own

experience, I didn't know as much as I thought I knew about how people learn to write.

Like many people, I assumed that writing was a kind of universal skill that transferred easily from one situation to the next. As I proposal writer, I had lived by the axiom of writing teachers everywhere to "consider your audience," but I was still surprised to learn just how important context is when it comes to learning how to write. Writing Studies scholars have found that a student who masters writing in one context—like the high school English classroom—often struggles to write well in contexts that they are unfamiliar with—like the university engineering classroom or that sales report they have to write for their new job.

This difficulty in transfer can stem from the misconception that once a person is a "good writer" in the English classroom they are a good writer everywhere.

Such a perspective leads students to adopt strategies that have been successful in the past, even if those strategies are poor fits for their new situations. Because it is impossible to teach students how to write well in all contexts, I came away from my composition theory seminar determined to teach my students to analyze the writing

situations they face and determine what "good writing" means in those situations. Such analysis reduces the time it takes to write well in new contexts.

Another experience that changed the way I teach and think took place as I performed research for my seminar papers and my dissertation. Sure, I had written research papers as a student and I had performed research in my professional writing work, but I found that I was thinking about research differently now. I wasn't just researching as a student, I was doing so as both a student and a teacher.

For instance, when I went to the library or searched for sources online, I began to think of my own students performing the same action in response to one of my assignments. I began to ask myself if I had prepared them to perform the kind of research that would keep them engaged and motivate them to integrate research into their everyday lives as a means of fact-checking the never-ending stream of information they face.

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I found my footing as a researcher as my vocabulary began to expand. Once I learned the language of my discipline, I gained a better sense of what I was looking for (and how to find it), but I also became aware of new ways of thinking about subjects that I hadn't considered before. In my own experience as an undergraduate, I often scoffed at the idea of "theory," telling myself that I would take the concreteness of application any day of the week. But as I became more comfortable with the language of theory during my graduate work in writing and literary studies, it became increasingly clear that theory can be employed not to obfuscate, but to focus and help train the scholar's eye on what is missing or what is unsaid yet implied. Learning to combine theory with application was a new way of seeing things, including my own life experiences.

I wanted my own students to have similar moments of clarity but realized that there was both a motivation and language barrier between us. Like the undergraduate version of me, my students are often uninterested in theory. They want hands-on experience; they want to learn by doing. I love the idea of learning by doing, but I also know that those learning experiences can be expanded and transformative if students can be metacognitive—if they can think about their own thinking—in addition to doing. For me, theory provides a means of metacognition. Since I have started my doctorate, I have begun to be more explicit in my use theory within the classroom. And I have painstakingly

worked to connect theory to the work students are doing inside the classroom and out. I also go out of my way to connect the theoretical principles we are learning to my own experiences as a writer and a reader, often explaining how my aversion to theory either increased my learning curve or caused me to make professional decisions that could have been different.

When I first came to BYU-Idaho, I was the guy with professional writing experience. That hasn't changed for me. Those experiences still inform my teaching and affect decisions I make as I prepare, teach, and grade student work. But my experience as the old man in the graduate seminar has reframed those experiences and made them mean different things to me in different ways. Now, as I prepare to teach a new course or return to an old lesson that I have taught before, I am armed with new skills, new ideas, new ways of thinking.

In addition, my experience as a student has increased my empathy for my own students. I know what it's like to be on the other side of the desk, listening to instructions that seem a bit unclear. I know what it is to struggle with a series of big projects converging at the end of the semester. This knowledge has helped me think about my students in new ways and changed the way I organize my classroom, my syllabus, and my I-learn site.

Going back to school has not been easy on my family, and I am looking forward to spending more time with my wife and daughters. But questions like "why am I doing this?" are in my past. And I think the knowledge I have gained will benefit me, my students, and the university long after I get a new set of robes and that funny little hat. ♦

