

On Podcasting, Program Development, and Intergenerational Thinking

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I spent my first year of college as a music business major, a wannabe audio engineer. Thanks to two main factors, that major didn't take. First, I learned audio engineering wasn't just being present while cool music happened. Second, I took first year writing, which convinced me to become an English major (more on that in a bit).

Despite the major switch, my audio experience proved an unexpected asset when I began pursuing a PhD in English at The University of Texas at Austin in 2011. While at UT-Austin, I worked in the Digital Writing and Research Lab, collaborating with other graduate students on projects at the intersection of digital media and rhetoric and writing studies. At the time, podcasts were attracting more and more academic attention, and, given my background with digital audio, I ended up leading a team that created a rhetoric podcast called *Zeugma*. When my work on that project ended, I started my own podcast: *Rhetoricity*.

Even though I washed out of that music business program, I enjoy recording, editing, and producing podcasts. But, to be frank, I didn't just start *Rhetoricity* for the love of the medium. It was also an excuse to engage in some intergenerational networking. Having a podcast gave me a pretext to reach out to established scholars without the anxiety-ridden experience of walking up to them at a conference and introducing myself out of the blue. Instead, I could email them to tell them I appreciated one of their recent publications, then ask if they'd be interested in a podcast interview at an upcoming event.

As a result, I've spent the past decade interviewing scholars across disciplinary generations.¹ And, because podcast interviews tend to be more personal and free-wheeling than academic publications, I've often learned not just about interviewees' research interests and teaching philosophies, but about their on-the-ground career experiences—the departments, programs, collaborators, and day-to-day obstructions that shaped their professional lives. Before I started conducting and coordinating podcast interviews, I had read scholarship like Sharon Crowley's *Composition in the University* and Lisa L. Coleman and Lorien Goodman's "Rhetoric/Composition: Intersections/Impasses/Differends," which gave me a sense of where, when, why, and how rhetoric and writing studies coalesced in US higher education. But reading such scholarship is different than hearing firsthand about Crowley's experiences in her PhD program, or how Andrea Lunsford first found out about the Conference on College Composi-

tion and Communication, or how Tarez Samra Graban navigates the specific terrain of her program's undergraduate curriculum.

There's a risk that the preceding sentence will sound like I'm exalting myself and my interviewees—the academic equivalent of placing myself proximate to power in the proverbial room where it happens. But while I have great respect for those three interviewees, my point is that those interviews gave me a clearer impression of how prosaic, local, and material—how pointedly *unexalted*—teaching and studying rhetoric and writing can be. My experiences coordinating other intergenerational audio projects, most notably the Rhetoric Society of America's 2018 Oral History Initiative, have reinforced that impression (Detweiler and Williams).

In particular, intergenerational interviews have taught me to appreciate the influence that mundane institutional, departmental, and programmatic structures have on interviewees' careers. It made a big difference whether they were the lone rhetorician in a literature department or working alongside faculty with similar disciplinary backgrounds; whether there were networks of colleagues at other local institutions with whom they could correspond or meet up; whether they found themselves collaborating or competing with potential allies in communication studies or colleges of education.² I learned that things like what department they were in, what that department's curriculum looked like, and what administrative positions they held (e.g., working as WPAs or writing center directors) affected their careers at least as much as their research and teaching interests.

But the kinds of intergenerational networks common in rhetoric and writing studies tend to emphasize research and teaching more than the everyday planning and development that shapes programs, departments, and institutions. That's not to say the latter isn't addressed at conferences and in published work (consider Johnson, Simmons, and Sullivan; Peebles, Rosinski, and Strickland; Shelton 20), especially when it comes to the general-education writing programs that have long played central roles in the field's scholarship and teacher training. But the intergenerational work graduate students do with their thesis and dissertation advisors and the training they receive in teaching practicums prioritize particular kinds of thinking that can take broader institutions and programs for granted.

So let me rewind for a moment to trace out my own after-the-fact programmatic genealogy. The Belmont University first-year writing course that convinced me to become an English major was taught by a rhetoric and writing studies specialist whose class gave me a radically different sense of what English studies could be than the literature-centered courses I took in high school. That continued throughout my undergraduate career: because I chose the English major's writing concentration, I took a number of courses (e.g., Theories of

Writing, Advanced Composition, Book Editing in Context) that I only later learned to identify as rhetoric and writing courses. Like most undergraduates, I was largely unaware of the field's existence as such and completely clueless that getting a de facto undergraduate degree in rhetoric and writing studies was a remarkably rare opportunity. I did not and probably could not have grasped the work that went into developing such a curriculum.

From there, I landed in the English MA program at the University of Louisville, mostly because it offered a decent stipend in my hometown and not because I had any sense of the scope and quality of its rhetoric and writing faculty, much less Kentucky's state-level restrictions on redundant graduate programs at public universities, which meant Louisville offered the commonwealth's only PhD in Rhetoric and Composition. And so, almost by accident (but also, in retrospect, through the careful guidance of undergraduate mentors), I ended up in an MA program that fostered an explicit interest in rhetoric and writing studies.

And then, after a few years teaching writing at two- and four-year institutions around Nashville, Tennessee, I was accepted into a PhD program at UT-Austin, aware of but still not fully recognizing the rarity of its standalone Department of Rhetoric and Writing as well as the affiliated (and aforementioned) Digital Writing and Research Lab. While I was technically an English PhD student, almost all my assistantships and the faculty members with whom I worked operated under the auspices of that department.

But where did these things come from? How did such majors and graduate programs and departments happen? Why, as I later learned, were they relatively few? Even five years after finishing my PhD, and a couple of years into the work of starting a Public Writing and Rhetoric degree program at my current institution, I am still putting such things together. But/and/thus, I would wager, rhetoric and writing-centered program development is a particularly important site of local and cross-institutional intergenerational thinking. What do our undergraduate and graduate degree programs look like? What are their histories, politics, and futures? What is the obscure state policy, institutional exigence, or forgotten argument that prevented or gave rise to this or that rhetoric and writing course, concentration, major? Precisely because they can become so workaday—as overlooked as the asbestos in a Brutalist humanities building—broader programmatic structures, rationales, and elisions can be challenging for newcomers to both the field and specific institutions to apprehend. Such things pop up in podcast interviews and passing conversations, but are often not baked into intergenerational mentorship in the ways research and teaching are. Even as rhetoric and writing programs pop up with increasing frequency (Giberson, Nugent, and Ostergaard), they can still fly under the intergenerational radar.

Yet as I have realized (often accidentally and anecdotally), because effective program development can require the breadth and depth of institutional knowhow possessed by more established generations, but also the flexibility and awareness of the field's burgeoning corners possessed by relative newcomers, I would position it as a key site for intergenerational thinking and a significant ongoing concern as we map out where we are and where we're going in rhetoric and writing studies. That's not to say intergenerational thinking is a panacea. After all, a network that is intergenerational but otherwise homogeneous can perpetuate inequities in hiring and other programmatic practices that have long pervaded rhetoric and writing programs. This has been a lingering issue in my podcasting work as well: given that my professional network is disproportionately white, what can I do to invite scholars of color into the conversation ("Rhetorical Juxtapositions")? But intergenerational thinking provides one way to broaden perspectives in institutional conversations that can span years if not decades. Does that mean making programmatic matters more central to graduate training or (though I can't imagine "more podcasts!" is anyone's idea of a solution in 2021) conducting and recording more intergenerational conversations? Of that I'm not yet sure. We'd have to think about that together.

Notes

1. To clarify, I'm using "generation" here less as a marker of age and more as a marker of how long people have been in the field. For the purposes of this piece, a thirty year old who started their first faculty position in 2021 would be the same "generation" as a fifty year old starting a similar position at the same time.
2. For examples of such factors' effects, consult Detweiler and Williams 569.

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