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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT | REVIEW ARTICLE

A reconsideration of career for English PhDs in the digital age

Liping Yang & Haris Haq

Abstract: An increasingly shrinking job market for English PhDs in academia is making both students and departments rethink English graduates' career plans after the completion of their respective graduate studies. Considering the rise of technology-related job markets and contracting job opportunities in traditional English academia, English PhDs should consider what their education is worth and fully apply their marketable skills in job hunting in both academia and industries. English departments should fully utilize the resources at the university scale and make potential changes in the curriculum construction and degree management in building up the interdisciplinary joint/dual degree with some other technology-related programs to further prepare the graduates for better and broader job opportunities. By analyzing the current job market, English PhDs' market skills, and feasible changes departments could make, we argue that both English PhDs and departments should adjust their take on education and career plans to increase the employment opportunities for English PhDs.

Keywords: Job market, English PhDs, technology

English students are no doubt well-versed when it comes to language usage and its effective employment in the writing, communication, and interpretation of ideas critically and thoughtfully. Newly recruited PhDs are proficient in English, trained and adept in pedagogy, familiar with instructional technology in daily teaching, passionate about college life, and expert communicators. Given their respective training, students with English degrees make strong job market candidates in a wide variety of fields: teaching, journalism, law, publishing, communication, corporate management, entertainment, fine arts, politics, etc. When it comes to doctoral studies, English is one of the prominent departments that recruit a large number of Ph.D. students in the United States every year. Beyond research engagements and taking various advanced English courses, many English PhDs also teach undergraduate English courses such as English Composition, Business Writing, and various literature courses. According to George Levine, a member of the MLA committee: "Unless secondary education improves—a condition that requires universities to invest a lot of time and money in helping high schools teach writing better—it will be virtually impossible to cut down the size of freshman composition significantly." Therefore, a large number of Ph.D. students are expected and required to fill the need of this teaching pool. Overall, there are numerous compelling reasons for the English department to invest in a high number of English PhDs every year. It should be noted that large enrolment numbers are not necessarily proportional to the difficulty of application. On the contrary, doctoral admissions are becoming increasingly fiercer and harder year by year.

What is the current climate for English Ph.D.s in the job market? In 2000, the job market was regarded as very good particularly in Rhetoric and Composition and tenure-track positions did not have sufficient qualified applicants (Stygall, 2000). At that time, especially for PhDs in Rhetoric and Composition, the market was considered a "good

fortune." However, the following decades witnessed the decline of tenure-track positions in English, including the lack of positions for new PhDs, and the rising number of spots incorporated or other industry job markets. The existing, unmatched Ph.D. students have felt the added pressure because the number of graduated Ph.D. students who have obtained tenure-track academic jobs upon graduation has dropped dramatically. According to David Colander, in one of his recent economic analyses on the English Ph.D. job market, "department's placement (of English PhDs) rate in tenure-track jobs is between 25 and 30 percent, rather than close to 50 percent" (Colander & Zhuo, 2015, p.142). Also, the data from MLA shows that fewer than 50 percent of the graduating students from all programs get tenure-track jobs. Only about 20 percent get non-tenure-track teaching positions. Besides, "students in top programs might have a reasonable chance of getting tenure-track jobs at a national research university or national research liberal arts colleges, the chances for such placements are essentially nil for students graduating from lower-ranked programs" (p.141). The job market for PhDs in many humanities departments is "a situation we have lived for two generations" according to Grafton and Grossman (2011), English and other humanities departments must strive to live with these supply exceeding demand issues in the academic market for most humanities Ph.D. candidates.

One reason behind the excess supply situation lies in the common idea of the academic job. Since a large number of Ph.D. students have never been out of school since their college, a noble job in academia could be an extended lifestyle in a tenure-track position. As many scholars in humanity studies pointed out, graduates internalize the "attitudes (implicit or explicit) and assume that the "best" students will be professors... But the default, the hope, the gold ring, is the tenure-track position" (Grafton & Grossman, 2011). Anything other than a professor would be regarded as "leaving the academy" or even worse when seen as "having crossed the line from the light of humanistic inquiry into the darkness of grubby capitalism" when taking the knowledge of English to the business field (Grafton & Grossman, 2011).

Especially as many scholars called for, some humanities departments, including English, should greatly reduce the admission pool or stop admitting students. Once those PhDs get accepted, they become graduate students with a certain amount of stipend, assistantship, or scholarship that can often bring about nostalgia for peaceful academic school life, and at this point, few doctoral students think about the career crisis. If they do, as "some programs provide warnings about the job market situation...", then "...those warnings can get lost in the elation that accompanies acceptance" (Colander & Zhuo, 2015, p.144). Projecting into the future, the joy of admission almost positively takes them to create the fantasy land that all the previously hard work would be paid off with a tenure-track job combined with a decent salary.

Yet, less than half of students get tenure-track positions. As the MLA reminds us, "Ph.D. granting research universities constitute only about thirty percent of the job market" (McHaney, 2001, p.111). In short, students envisioning a career only in academia should expand their job views. English is a major that could be vigorously employed in other sectors of the job market. Those who have never been out of college and have not tried any other professions that stand outside of academia should stop taking an uncertain view of non-academic employment. What they have always been doing becomes the dominant factor in their career path decision, and therefore the career choice of this good liberal arts education has been greatly narrowed down. McHaney argues that students need to understand "what their education is worth" (p.110) when they cannot consider a career outside of the academic atmosphere. Some scholars believe that English PhDs are not fully informed about the job market situation before enrollment—either over-positive or ignorant—and part of the reason they apply for graduate school is the aforementioned lifestyle reasons, which made them follow their academic dream. "Obtaining a tenure-track position is not a noble pursuit it is the opposite" (Colander & Zhuo, 2015, p.145)".

2. A consideration of alternatives

It is important to encourage English PhDs to have open eyes on the job markets and remind them their major creates many work opportunities. Upon being accepted into their program, graduates could start discussing the open employment and historical job placement in their program with academic advisors. After they know the historical data about job placement from their programs, students can be realistically aware of the future job markets and set their ambitions accordingly. Additionally, students should be more open-minded about the job markets and think about what they could do with their degree by combining their interests and knowledge of English. Other potential career path choices that they may not know about will be analyzed later in this paper.

Meanwhile, seeing the stern job market situation, some scholars also blame the department for the rising “underemployment” rate. Some suggest that “Ph.D. enrollments in the humanities, social sciences and related disciplines (e.g., music, communications) SHOULD decline, sharply, and probably some marginal Ph.D. programs should close” (Vedder, 2019). This might be an excessively harsh and somehow impolitic act, and a large part of the value of English graduate education was indeed ignored; for example, the resources at the university scale. However, to address this underemployment issue, English departments must redesign programs to reflect the current job market that does not appear as good as it was since. Now, we see a situation where supply has dramatically exceeded demand in the academic market. The ultimate goal of the program is to cultivate students in individual improvement, support academic progress and prepare students for a JOB. Traditional institutions primarily aim to train students’ research ability and prepare them for college teaching/researching positions. However, as the job market data shows, the likelihood of finding a solid research-oriented tenure-track job goes down with the program ranking market economy. Training students for research jobs as we did a couple of decades ago may not work well, especially for programs with a relatively low ranking.

Regarding the essence of an English major, it is not hard to see that the English field “is by nature interdisciplinary” (Colander & Zhuo, 2015, p.149). By making interdisciplinary connections with other specialties, English programs with different rankings, and even different concentrations within the same program could all succeed by preparing students for diverse jobs to fully unfold their interests and potentials reasonably. Instead of focusing on providing what is best described as “academic research vocational training”, departments could focus on training outside of the English program for interdisciplinary work that “use English and writing but do not teach it” at an easier cost (Colander, & Zhuo, 2015, p.147). Students with a mastery of English and interdisciplinary and versatile skills would be highly desirable candidates in the future workplace for positions in both education and corporate settings.

3. Instituting program redesign

We argue that departmental doctoral training should prepare students for the job market they are likely to face in the near future. When the tenure track position is truly unrealistic for everyone to obtain, it is wise to be prepared in advance by emphasizing academic research OR practical training differently. This is not to argue that only PhDs from top-ranking universities with massive publications could get the tenure-track position, that tenure-track positions are more desirable than other industry occupations, or that programs should dissuade their students from pursuing only the tenure-track position. But that is a separate issue; instead of indiscriminately encouraging everyone to pursue a research position within very limited job market spots, English programs could better prepare their graduates with a set of skills that are competitive and “marketable” (Colander & Zhuo, 2015, p.146) for a large range of diverse professions requiring English skills, for example, technical writing, consulting, or other occupations. If this shift could happen, the English department could succeed by reasonably channeling its graduates into various sectors. As a result, they broaden job opportunities for their students with diversity and flexibility, improve the employment rate effectively, decrease job-hunting anxiety or even failure, and enable the student to achieve success within a much broader platform to broaden the practical opportunities for PhDs to apply their skills in our current moment.

Redesigning programs is not a novel idea to boost the programs and students' success as many programs have done so during the last couple of decades. But when it comes to English programs, besides advising students to keep open eyes when deciding on a career, there is very little specific and feasible advice to attune to the full range of work opportunities. After Colander and Zhuo (2015) suggested some English programs may have to "develop dual or joint degree programs, with students getting degrees not only in English but also in another field" to survive, it is worth noticing that there has been an increase in technology-related jobs (STEM especially): education technology, technical writing, UX design, etc. According to the US Department of Labor: "Between 2017 and 2029, the number of STEM jobs will grow 8 percent, a higher rate than non-STEM jobs—with positions in computing, engineering, and advanced manufacturing leading the way." If English programs could restructure the program by building up the joint/dual program with some STEM programs, there would be a significant chance to better save graduates' jobs and make them highly desirable candidates in future job markets that require interdisciplinary skills.

Some scholars say such redesign or change is "unrealistic and difficult to implement" (Colander & Zhuo, 2015, p.149). However, based on the analysis of various programs' goals and different job posting requirements, there is a feasible redesign direction to take with the most considerable potential to boost employment: building up a joint program/degree with instructional design components. We have seen the English department's current courses' objectives cultivate many desired qualities from these two fields on the job posting and demands: rhetorical thinking and analysis, pedagogy theory, digital media production, etc. Meanwhile, students in the English department have proven to have shown many competitive qualities in job markets of instructional design from their education based on their teaching experience and knowledge of instructional tools. Therefore, one proposition can be put forward. That is, potentially combining the English program with instructional design components could significantly improve the employment rate. Here, English students could fully utilize their skills to the largest extent.

To center on this case study, instructional designers are vital in learning and are always "tasked with redesigning the courses, developing entire courses or curriculums, and creating training materials" in educational settings ("What do instructional designers do"). The focus of instructional design has historically been on the practical development of leadership, including "interpersonal communication, coordination, articulation, scheduling, needs assessment, problem-solving" (Doughty, & Durzo, 1981). Facing the situation of a harsh job market and scarcely invested resources into the curriculum design, some universities, including Syracuse University, decided to "redesign the program to "integrate the varied skills and interests of the faculty, the curriculum design requirements, the field experiences available to students, the projected job market and the student applicant pool" (Doughty & Durzo, 1981). Among all redesign procedures and results, one of the significant changes is to make the relationship with external academic programs, specifically, "joint masters and doctoral programs, dual faculty appointments, team teaching, and joint recruiting ventures" (Doughty & Durzo, 1981) or cross-program enrollment as such redesign makes sense economically.

These program redesign proposals explore the related instructional designer competencies and ensure the respective graduates and incoming professionals are prepared to perform at the workplace effectively. In a study of instructional design and technology job advertisements, William Sugar and other scholars categorized and analyzed the specific job skills from instructional design job postings. The majority of job positions are dispersed into the categories of "Administrator, Course Developer, Curriculum Designer, eLearning Specialist/Designer, Human Performance Technologist, Instructional Designer, Instructional Technologist, Specialist/Consultant/Coordinator, and Trainer" mainly as "specialist, consultant or coordinator" (Sugar et al., 2012). Among them, they found that, besides existing knowledge and skill of instructional design and prominence of media production competencies, most examined job positions identify key characteristics including "multimedia production skills", "e-learning experience," "online course development," "interpersonal skills" "effective oral and written communication skills" etc. In reviewing the job

description in the higher education setting, some competencies are found in a substantial number of jobs requirement: managing LCMS and web editing skills are "more prevalent".

For PhDs in Rhetoric and Composition, often, courses with significant technological applications are offered, such as "Rhetoric of Digital Media", "User Experience Research", and "Digital Media Production" at Georgia State University. These courses published introduce students to "current theories and practices for design and production with digital media to develop rhetorically savvy composers and critics" (Dept. of English). Students could also get "practice in web design and other digital media design for different applications such as scholarly projects, digital pedagogy, online teaching, and digital editing" (Dept. of English). Students in these courses have cultivated competencies in web design and multimedia production. According to the job placement data, some students even get positions as site managers, technical editors, web communication managers, and digital content managers after graduation, which further improves their web design and multimedia product competency. As the Rhetoric and Composition website indicates, Rhetoric and Compositions students will study "rhetorical history and theory as well as contemporary approaches to the theory and practice of writing in both academic and non-academic settings" and "improve the ability to communicate effectively" (Dept. of English). Based on the existing knowledge of communication, coordination, and web design, a joint program with instructional design components will make them more competitive and attractive to prospective employers. Digital Rhetoric has already taken the profession of English into the future. English PhDs are not only discussing language and literature, but they are learning the digital age skills. Thus, it is time to encourage English PhDs to find a natural place in the technological economy we exist within today by building joint programs within technological fields (for instance, with instructional design).

Most English PhDs have assistantships or engage in professionalization as teaching assistants or writing studio tutors. They have been familiarizing themselves with teaching, instruction, design, and most importantly, various online/offline instruction tools during their PhDs. Instructional tools are used intensively in daily in-class discussions and activities and after-class assignments and grading. Instructors utilize those platforms to post class announcements, upload class material, create an activity/discussion portal, grade students' assignments, etc. They have been immersed in online learning and instruction and are already highly competent in technological tools in educational settings. Since one of the major goals in instructional design graduate programs is to create effective online learning, based on the amount of online learning English PhDs have, a joint program would provide those graduates a wider platform to further practice and contribute their e-teaching and e-learning skills and experience.

When it comes to English graduates, they have been trained to master English in both academic and non-academic settings, oral and written forms, they tend to be very good with words and, therefore, have exceptional communication skills. Educational technology companies seek various professionals for customer-focused roles and need people well-versed in technology. When placing English PhDs in the education technology job market, their excellent communication skills would significantly improve their competencies without additional training. There is no reason that English doctoral students should not gain competencies in this direction.

4. Conclusion

By closely examining the skill sets English PhDs possess, and desirable skills in an instructional design program, it is obvious to find out that English PhDs, especially in Rhetoric and Composition, are already deeply immersed in technology-based learning and teaching environment and armed with various skill sets that could make them find a career in and out of English field. We do not argue that English PhDs should give up their career in English academia and seek technology-related jobs, nor that pursuing technological focuses or coupling their degrees with instructional design will guarantee job placement. This is a different issue; seeing that English graduates already possess some of the paramount skills in the job market of instructional design or education technology, some technology-related

training will truly make them more competitive in the job market in a very economical way and greatly expand employment options.

Furthermore, English PhDs should also change their view on the job market and start to hold a more positive attitude toward jobs outside of academia. They should be fully aware of the worth of their education. English academics are responsible for the next generation's profession, including mentorship and guidance. When the job market has been less rosy, they should find innovative solutions to adapt accordingly and solve the problem.

As mentioned before, English departments could build up partnerships with technology-based programs, to provide related training to further help English graduates to enhance and utilize their language skills and pedagogy experience. These types of training do not require any extra costs since universities already offer these courses in another department, plus some departments are also looking forward to redesigning their programs to equip their students with skills from the English department. Part of English students' funding can be extended to gaining a master's degree in technology-related fields. In addition, building interdisciplinary connections with other departments gives students a chance to learn about various industry job opportunities through different organizations. While there is a hardship for English PhDs to find a tenure-track position in this increasingly contracting job market, an English Ph.D. trained in educational technology, instructional design, or technical writing will encounter less resistance and struggle. As a concluding thought, a flourishing job market in the English department is a joint effort by the students and the department. Students should stop seeing jobs only in traditional academia due to the changes in both job and economic markets. By conceiving the job market more broadly to that outside academia, PhDs may find themselves very competitive in some exciting job opportunities in the digital world. Therefore, the English department should consider building up the interdisciplinary joint/dual degree with some other technology-related programs to boost students' future career success. While there is a job market crisis, there is also considerable opportunity.

5. Disclosure of Conflict

The authors declares that they have no conflicts of interest.

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