

Introduction

“What does public scholarship look like at the graduate level?”

“What do publicly engaged graduate students want? What are their pressing concerns?”

“How do graduate students get into publicly active work?”

“What are publicly active graduate students *doing*?”

As graduate students involved in a range of “publicly active” work—curating public exhibits, developing and directing community-based projects and programs, teaching in diverse settings outside our universities—and affiliated with Imagining America’s Publicly Active Graduate Education (PAGE) initiative [<http://pageia.com/>], an effort to grow a national network of publicly active graduate students in the arts and humanities—we have often been asked questions like these. Most often the questioners are earnest—faculty members and administrators whose own work has taken, to use Paula Mathieu’s term, a “public turn” and who are looking for ways to rethink and even restructure their graduate programs in order to support engagement. Sometimes the questioners are skeptical, sidling up to us after a talk or presentation we’ve given as if to ask for the *real* story; “I see that *you* have carved out an unusual niche for yourself,” they seem to suggest, “but how widespread is this kind of activity, really?”

Our intent in this special issue was not to respond to those questions—or at least, to do so only secondarily. Asking “what” publicly active graduate students do or “how” they do it invites a discourse about models and best practices, pathways and examples. Such a discourse can be extremely useful, inspiring, and energizing. Seeing what others have done and how they made it happen within sometimes extensive institutional constraints can motivate individual innovation; we have all certainly taken such tangible “a-ha” moments back from our national gatherings to our own work. But such discourse also tends towards the celebratory, and even, we think, the defensive, seeking to prove and affirm that graduate students *can* develop and create meaningful, sustainable community partnerships despite the almost-certain fact of our geographical transience and the institutional narratives that still tell us such work is better served post-tenure. Clearly, as our occasionally skeptical questioners remind us, there is a need for such affirmation. Yet treading that defensive ground is not where *we* find ourselves engaging with our most pressing and penetrating concerns.

Our aim in this issue, then, was to invite graduate students and new assistant professors to theorize beyond the individual case and beyond the representative model, to take as a given the *fact* of publicly active scholarship at the graduate level and to explore in more detail its implications and consequences. For this reason, we issued a two-part call. We invited article-length submissions that “emerge from and reflect on community partnerships while also actively considering the consequences of taking these partnerships seriously in our scholarship, in our teaching, and/or in our disciplinary training.” At the same time, we invited much shorter, less formal, forward-thinking responses to questions that invited more personal reflection: “What new agendas do you see publicly engaged graduate students setting? What has being ‘publicly active’ meant in your own trajectory to and through graduate school? What’s helped you? What’s

hindered you? How has your community-based work influenced or informed your academic training? What does it—or what would it—look like to ‘come up’ in a university culture that acknowledged, accommodated, and encouraged civic engagement at the graduate level?”

The submissions we received in answer to these prompts tell a story about the kind of innovation that is and also isn’t happening in graduate programs around the country. At their most exciting moments, these essays demonstrate what can happen when up-and-coming scholars are simultaneously involved in community-based work and invested in their own, usually quite conventional disciplinary training. They suggest new research methodologies that push disciplinary boundaries and begin to stretch and challenge voices and forms of academic writing. Community practice has transformed the way contributors to this issue engage their own scholarly work and their relationship to theory. For some, agency and advocacy is central. For others, bridging the divides between disciplines or the disparities between classrooms and communities are a focus.

These authors remain part of an academic community that communicates in traditional forms and circulates specific kinds of research texts. They are active members of alternative communities as well—communities that may speak in very different forms and defy the boundaries of academic-style writing. Dana Edell writes about this struggle in her essay about her work creating a forum for New York City teenage girls to express and reflect on their sexuality. She admits that she has thrown academic journals across the room in reaction to their frustrating lack of creative methodologies and their distance from the kinds of activities that she finds actually get girls in her program to talk and write about their lives. When our work within various communities demands creativity, flexibility, and deep collaboration, and when it produces the kinds of insights that Edell’s work does, traditional scholarship seems inadequate for expressing what we’ve found. And the point at which we become dissatisfied with traditional forms and structures is the point at which we begin to push those disciplinary forms themselves to change. Michelle Bellino’s contribution—which elaborates on her work with trauma, *testimonios* (testimonial narratives) and the politics of translation—also interrogates the usage of voice and form within our academic and community work. Raising issues regarding violence, the afterlife of trauma, and representation, Bellino highlights the interplay between author(s), audience, and textual affect, aiming to bridge the gaps between academia and advocacy. Alexis Gumbs’ essay poetically explores the gendered and racialized violence that occurred in Durham during and after the Lacrosse incident in 2006, focusing on the efforts of UBUNTU, a local collective formed to support survivors of sexual violence. By writing her essay in dialogue with Audre Lorde’s poem “A Litany for Survival,” Gumbs traces the elisions and acts of violence that characterize language and social practice in universities and local communities, while allowing the reader to experience the poem as a “lived process.”

The essays in this collection also demonstrate how our community-based work shapes our pedagogy and expands the models and methods available for our teaching—in the undergraduate classroom as well as the community classroom. Sheila Carter-Tod’s essay reflects on the parallels between the personal and institutional struggles of engaged

scholars and those of students in the Pilot Street Literacy Partnership, a program that serves refugees living in a rural southwestern Virginia apartment complex as they seek to navigate the institutional and personal circumstances of their lives. As she focuses on the fragmentarity of her students' lives—balancing their roles as parents, literacy students, and workers—Carter-Tod advocates for New Literacy pedagogies, which connect literacy learning to learners' active participation in shaping their own communities and futures. Rebecca Krefting demonstrates how publicly active scholars successfully balance their own multiple roles by describing her integration of graduate studies, teaching American studies and co-directing the Lee Middle School Comedy Club. She illustrates the ways her experiences working with this successful comedy program have shaped her dissertation and enabled her to develop innovative university-level classroom projects in her discipline. Aneil Rallin and Ian Barnard take their cue from underground alt. culture and place the question of form at the heart of their piece about 'Zines in the composition classroom. Arguing that traditional methods of teaching composition limit discourse and criticality by privileging form, thereby obscuring the politics inherent therein, the authors teach 'Zines as a way to foreground questions of diversity, audience, and the typically hidden politics of persuasion. Michael-John DePalma frames his pedagogical innovation with a theoretical intervention, challenging the appropriateness of discourse community theory as a model for community service writing and proposing, instead, that teachers adopt activity theory to conceptualize this writing for their students. He suggests that activity theory assists students in overcoming their anxieties about community service writing by giving them a more realistic view of the rhetorical situation they face. Its emphasis on the fluidity of social practices breaks down the perception of "insiders" and "outsiders" and makes students more comfortable about developing sustained reciprocity with community partners.

Many of these contributors, together with the authors of the shorter pieces collected in answer to our second writing prompt, grapple with the parameters of what constitutes community service, public scholarship, service learning and civic engagement, and with the challenges of taking this work on as a student or new professor. But the absences in this issue are also very telling; they are perhaps indicative of the larger hurdles engaged graduate students and untenured professors face while operating within still very traditional structures and the limited models we possess for formally reflecting on our community projects. For example, we noted that, despite our invitation in the CFP for authors to reflect on their own positionality and to experiment with a more personal voice, many of those who submitted seemed hesitant to include this in their work. It may be because many of our disciplines continue to train us to distance ourselves from our research and writing and to remove ourselves from the text. It feels counterintuitive to reveal our personal investments in our community work when we are attempting to legitimize our work within our fields.

Similarly, despite our initial intentions to move beyond documentation and description of community-based work, we did receive many submissions that wanted to report on and celebrate projects rather than actively reflect on their consequences and implications. Why is it so hard to have a reflexive relationship to our community-based work? To its academic/theoretical implications? In part, this difficulty may reflect the graduate

training we've received regarding research methodologies and academic writing forms. In our collective experiences, it is rare to find graduate classes that encourage you to experiment with academic writing or that actively guide any kind of experimental essay practice. Perhaps the answer also lies in the risks involved: We recognize the risk that authors in this issue are taking to write about their institutions and about the challenges they face in carving out distinctive professional and personal paths. We realize that writing a critically reflective piece about undertaking publicly engaged work while a student or new professor may mean assuming a vulnerable position.

On a related note, we anticipated receiving any number of submissions utilizing web-based and/or new media technology in their design and presentation. But we didn't. In fact, we hardly received any. Why? When so many of us are using and thinking about innovative ways to incorporate media technologies into our work, we have to wonder if there isn't a mental hump that some of us are still trying to get over when it comes to ideas about "scholarly" writing. Could it be that some of us (forgive us) "Gen-Xers," having lived before and through the tech explosion, still have certain notions about scholarship that find us more comfortable with traditional forms? Is the technological part of our work as "real" and as rigorous as the words we write? Interestingly, most of the few tech-based submissions we received struggled to frame the work theoretically. The technology was used as a tool without examining the implications of the medium. Perhaps then, rather than being comforted by traditional forms, we have become so accustomed to the miracles of new media that writing about their implications would be as silly as writing about a pencil or a laptop. Alas, absent more examples to study, we can only speculate.

In the face of publicly engaged graduate education's many challenges, these articles truly represent labors of love. Because of the ways many of the pieces included here do stretch conventional disciplinary expectation and form, they are not the kind of writing that could be published in many major academic journals, though publishing in those journals might bestow upon our authors more academic credibility. Knowing that this submission to an on-line special issue would not likely carry significant weight on their vita, and on top of all of their other commitments, these scholars chose to conserve and manage their time and energy to produce articles for this special issue of *Reflections*. And there are many other graduate scholars whose writing and reflections would contribute to the richness of this issue, but who couldn't dedicate the time and energy to developing their ideas or revising their essays. To generate publicly engaged scholarship in many ways still demands "extra" work and a lot of hope and commitment.

As the editors of this special issue, we have certainly experienced the challenges of this extra work first hand. In addition to our own obligations as graduate students, teachers, curators, and directors of community projects, we have felt the added demands of juggling personal and professional schedules, traveling for research, committing energy to our families, and moving as our lives transition. Finding the additional time and energy to collaborate on this issue and to develop our own reflections for this introduction has been a real struggle. Yet we also feel the sense of hope that comes from our shared

commitments and from engaging in these crucial dialogues. As graduate students working from different disciplines, backgrounds and (international) time zones, we came together (via conference calls, e-mails and so on) to collectively ponder the many facets and forms of publicly engaged scholarship. We are excited about the less formal, shorter pieces that we've also included in this special issue; by condensing their personal reflections, these authors have developed pithy, personal essays that look toward to the future of engaged scholarship and pose questions about where we go now. From inception to conception, our editorial process has been an open dialogue with the contributors and with each other. All of these articles are meant to be an invitation to readers to join this conversation and this electronic forum provides the opportunity for readers and the authors to dialogue within the journal pages. We hope this special issue is another step towards making publicly active work even more active and engaged. Let the dialogue continue...

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