

Pedagogue Bonus: Re-imagining English Graduate Education (w/Steve Parks)

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue Bonus, a short episode that covers a single topic or question. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this bonus episode, I talk with Steve Parks, an associate professor of English at the University of Virginia, whose teaching and research interests are in community organizing and partnership.

In our full conversation, Steve talks a lot about what it means to build a classroom that provides space for marginalized voices to be heard, and he offers best practices in approaching community organizations and working with local communities. Another thread in that conversation that didn't make the full episode was re-imagining graduate school programs in English, or how graduate education can be better formed to prepare and train students for all types of work. I shared with Steve my own hesitations with normalized narratives that exist in grad school. For example, "If you put in the time, if you do the work, if you produce the labor, if you serve in this or that capacity, you can really market yourself. Everything will work out, and you'll get a tenure track job in academia." I told him how I felt like that was unrealistic and how, I can't speak for everyone, but I felt this overwhelming sense of millennials, me included, being really tired of hearing that. That's not a solution. You can't just work really hard. It doesn't work like that, and even then, some of us don't want to pursue academia. Some of us want to move outside of academia.

Steve and I started talking about how grad school can be used to develop more practical skills, as opposed to reading articles and books and writing seminar papers. How more classes could be tailored toward understanding what resources are available and how to navigate getting resources for academic and nonacademic jobs. For example, how to write grants and what that process is like, or how to better build relationships with local organizations that can help create more sustainable local communities. Here's that conversation and please feel free to go post or tweet your thoughts or visit the blog on pedagoguepodcast.com and share your ideas. Again, that's pedagoguepodcast.com

SP: I used to say this a lot, but people got offended by it. I think graduate school actually de-skills you. I think it doesn't really give you a lot of skills you need to survive in the academy. I think there should be graduate classes in grant writing, graduate classes in organizational development, graduate classes where you intern at nonprofits, all these very material skills that now get taught as WPA skills, which are good but mainly for the university. I think you have to expand the education to give the grad students the skills so they can do this work. We talk a lot about change and politics but we don't actually give anybody the material practices that make that change or politics real. Grant writing is interesting because the need to write grants is a result of the privatization of the university and the way in which funds are distributed now. So it's a deal with the devil, and I think sometimes people imagine they have to get some \$200,000 grant. What that does is it makes sure your project will never continue, because you become dependent on the money. When I say grants, what I mean is thinking through the money you need and then thinking the different ways to get it. So it might be you get a \$500 pedagogy

grant and that supports the printing of a brochure. It might be that you go to your local church and they give you indirect grants by giving you meeting space. What I'm saying is that I think sometimes people start projects without thinking through what the cost and sustainability of it is. Because I don't think graduate education as a whole teaches people about how you manage resources. You're poor, you learn how to manage resources, but you don't learn how to think institutionally about resources.

So what I was saying with grants was, when you're doing that resourcing, think about the money you need and have, think about where you could get it, and then think about what is the amount that you know you can consistently get that'll make it sustainable. That's a skill I think that the grad programs should teach or professional organizations should teach. But I don't think it's being taught and thus, a lot of new partnerships fail and leave bad blood.

I circulate a lot and I actively try to talk to grad students from other institutions. I think graduate students understand that the university that I came up in, as 55-year-old white guy and have tenure in, is not going to be the university that they get hired in and it will not be the labor conditions they have.

It won't be the resources that they have, and we educate people to teach at Michigan, Syracuse, and Virginia, but they're probably going to be at a community college, a small state school. We teach them to write for journals, when they're going to be in places not giving the resources for that time. We teach them they should be political and our grad programs do not teach people how to do the work to get the resources to do that. When I talk to grad students right now, they feel betrayed or tricked because what we are promising, we being old tenured faculty, about the academy isn't what they're going to go into and grad programs seem to be unable to shift into this new reality because they're so intent. Our field is so intent on showing that we're as good as English or we're just like every other discipline.

When disciplines these days are sending people into a job shredder. There's just no jobs that provide a living wage. I think grad programs then should really consider whether when we say we have public importance, that can mean a job outside the academy. It can be in a nonprofit, it can be in a political position. What would it mean to shift our grad programs to provide students with skills where they could go to many places and enact literacy politics there? It's more they don't teach them how to enact the very theories we pretend have value. Because we're so wrapped up in a 1950 argument about disciplinarity and missing our true value at this moment. I think writing about writing, okay, maybe that's an argument that our work has value, but only to the most narrow set of people, and only to those who are fortunate to have tenure and publish. What about writing for social justice? What about rhetoric and composition as a public practice that occurs all over different domains and sites? That's more exciting, and I think that meshes more with the generational aspirations that our graduate students bring. They have seen a world that is profoundly unjust, they have been promised a degree that helps them address that. Then they find themselves de-skilled and unable to enact the politics that animate their lives. That's our fault. That's my generation's fault and we need to address that or lose a whole generation of really powerful scholars and activists.