PhD's for the 21st Century: Affordances and Disturbances of Interdisciplinarity and Engagement

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Over the last decade, York University has established itself as the "interdisciplinary” and "engaged" university. On the one hand, these terms have been mobilized by other universities and academic funding agencies to reflect and capture the relevance of the post-secondary sector in the context of more overt and greater demands on undergraduate degrees. On the other hand, it is our position that these terms have also come to define very specific contexts of academic work that have the potential to critically reflect on, and reposition, the Humanities. We argue in this position paper that York's challenge to, and negotiation of, traditional disciplinary research and teaching at the undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate levels has produced some unique constellations, affordances and disruptions that allow us to draw some lessons for the future of the Humanities PhD.

York University has the fourth-largest graduate student population in Ontario (we are the 12th largest program of 76 universities offering graduate programming in Canada (http://www.univcan.ca/canadian-universities/facts-and-stats/enrolment-by-university/), with 16 doctoral programs located in the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Administrative Studies, itself an outcome of York's persistent refusal to accept traditional boundaries between Social Sciences, Humanities, and Professional Studies (even though these boundaries persistently manifest in everyday negotiations through curriculum, standards, faculty appointments, performance indicators). A number of other programs that would traditionally be considered "Humanities" PhDs are located in the Faculty of Arts, Media, Performance and Design (Art History and Visual Studies, Cinema and Media Studies, Theatre and Performance Studies. At the program level, interdisciplinary graduate programs at York have largely been the outcome of faculty- and student-driven initiatives.

Thus, York has comparatively few disciplinary PhD programs in the Humanities (English, History, Philosophy, Linguistics, Anthropology, Music) and does not offer PhD programs in established disciplines such as any of the national languages (such as German, French, Spanish), Classical Studies. On the other hand, York offers a large number of non-traditional, interdisciplinary and often unique PhD programs that straddle not only disciplinary boundaries but also boundaries between the Social Sciences and the Humanities (Art History and Visual Culture; Cinema and Media Studies; Communication and Culture; Critical Disability Studies; Environmental Studies; Gender, Feminist and Women's Studies; Humanities; Science and Technology Studies; Social and Political Thought; Theatre and Performance Studies; Visual Arts), and occasionally open up pathways to professional programs (such as in the PhD program in Communication and Culture, a joint initiative with Ryerson University).

We argue that the nature of York's interdisciplinary programs has a number of consequences for rethinking what a Humanities PhD can mean, and how it should be taught. We argue that such rethinking cannot be guided by a false dichotomy that draws the lines of conflict between, on one hand, traditionalists advocating the continuation of a solid and successful Western tradition of PhD education that can be traced back to
Humboldt (or better – to the medieval origins of the university as a guild of learning), and, on the other hand, futurists who call for "creative disruptions" or "Napster moments" in the tertiary education of the 21st century that an inflexible university system is keen on preventing. Rather, we need to acknowledge that PhD training in the Humanities has never been immune to social changes and challenges. Responding to the expansion and accessibility of tertiary commodification after the Second World War, social movements, the rise of the knowledge economy, a global tertiary education system, digital media, and the marketization of tertiary education in a debt economy has generated negotiations over what needs to be preserved, what needs to be adapted, and what needs to be discarded in Humanities traditions of research, training and teaching. Each institution has a unique history of institutional adaptation. Some of the affordances that currently exist at York suggest possible alternatives for Humanities PhD's and ways to disturb dominant discourses about the role of the Humanities PhD in tertiary education, and it is to those we discuss below.

**Challenges and Affordances of Humanities PhD Programs at York**

1. **Incoming students apply to more than one program**

   40% of graduate applications are to more than one program at York. There is an expectation that a particular project can find an intellectual home in a number of programs. Evidence suggests that this is not necessarily true only for interdisciplinary programs – there is an expectation that programs such as History and English, for example, will also accommodate projects that require trans-disciplinary approaches, methodologies and theories. Intellectually, this movement generates cross-fertilization as well as the need for clarity about disciplinary boundaries, intersections, and exclusivities. In both cases students are ranking and prioritizing the various knowledge bases, skill sets, and departmental cultures best suited to address and fulfill the demands of their research over and against the prospect of disciplinary limitations. On a practical level, it has the potential to create research units, academic events and strategic alliances – often under-utilized – to strengthen and enhance interdisciplinary commitments and practices.

2. **Incoming students bring their professional backgrounds to the program**

   Many incoming PhD students are often accomplished professionals who come back to university with the expectation of enhancing their skills by adding layers of methodology, theory, abstraction, and comparison to their research and scholarship interests as well as their professional skills. They are also in a position to teach skills such as film making and editing, coding, professional writing, and non-academic grant applications that faculty either do not have or have not had the opportunity to practice for a while (despite many of York's faculty having had non-traditional career paths). There is a strong element of porosity or interfacing with the non-academic public and commercial sphere that can be drawn on and expanded and strengthened in course work, research projects, and group work. The challenge is to reorient departmental cultures with narrow
conceptions of what is internal and external to academic production while integrating these skills and/or articulating the skills doctoral studies provide more overtly to the curriculum in meaningful ways.

3. Competition among graduate students at the program level becomes less pronounced

The project-oriented nature of PhD work in interdisciplinary areas produces unique expertise in graduate students that greatly reduces the competitive nature of graduate programs. To put it differently: students in interdisciplinary programs are aware that they are called upon to develop their own specific range and sets of expertise. They are also aware that they will likely not compete for the same jobs, but even if they do, it will be a matter of fit of their various strengths. Further, they are generally aware of the odds of landing a tenure-track position and of the demands such positions can entail in terms of relocation across the country, continent and beyond, family sacrifice. Interdisciplinary PhD projects can accommodate a range of possible individual outcomes both within the academy and in industry, including the creative industries, government and the non-profit sector. As such, PhD students need to be able to develop and sustain a narrative of their expertise sets in different contexts. Over the last decade, undergraduate student services have expanded, and subsequently the culture and expectation of service and training for specific jobs has moved with this group to graduate school. Under these circumstances, we need to highlight the need for versatile research skills and a range of expertise sets that can ideally be the outcome of sustained engagement with a problem that straddles disciplinary boundaries and produces original knowledge valuable for both academic and non-academic career paths, and educate potential employers about the skills, knowledges and values that sustain this kind of expertise and make Humanities PhD's valuable assets in a wide range of working environments.

Given the new realities of increasing numbers of PhD’s in an environment of decreasing tenured professorial positions, doctoral students and post-doctoral fellows have been taking the lead in organizing groups, listservs, blogs such as the Versatile PhD, alt-ac, the National Post-Doctoral Association and the Canadian Association of Post-Doctoral Scholars in order to address and articulate the value of the PhD degree. Graduate students have been taking the lead at redefining and demanding wider recognition for the possibilities of their graduate education.

4. Faculty supervise and teach across disciplines

In an interdisciplinary environment, PhD committees play a crucial role for supervision. While many of York's faculty are cross-appointed to a number of graduate programs, the trans-disciplinary nature of PhD projects of necessity draws on often divergent areas of expertise, requiring group work, co-ordination and negotiation while also challenging assumptions about the disciplinary standards in which faculty members themselves were trained. For the student, cross appointment further reinforces the productive tension between openness and particularity. The student's research project is allowed to evolve
free from strict disciplinary restraints or even the formal interdisciplinary triangulation popularized by the social sciences. At the same time, cross-appointment allows for a process of sampling, exploration and experimentation with particular methods and theories without having to make extended commitments or sacrificing other aspects of their projects. Where the York PhD in Humanities has maintained a two-year period of course work, this requirement has developed as a safe platform for creativity, discovery, and perhaps more importantly, divergent learning experiences challenging a student’s preconception of their own project through a process of academic development that doesn't necessarily harmonize with the narrative of linear development.

5. **Theory as a lingua franca**

Conversely, the strong emphasis on "Theory" as a historically contextualized Humanities lingua franca of the Anglo-American academy since the 1970's leads to convergence and replication in program curricula in areas such as Critical Theory, Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, and Postcolonial Studies. This situation makes faculty deployment in graduate programs potentially more flexible and responsive to shifting needs of programs. It is the administration's task to understand how to support cross-Faculty appointments and the ways in which units can engage with administrative and budget structures to support more flexible deployment.

6. **Critique and professionalisation**

Critique is, and needs to remain, a fundamental element of PhD training, both as a set of skills and as a set of academic values. Engaging critically with existing scholarship and one's own research in order to produce original, sustained, sustainable and coherent knowledge that acknowledges the complexity of cultural, social and political phenomena remains the Humanities' core mission, which can be perceived as conflicting with imaginaries of the narcissistic, non-reflecting and forcefully optimistic "can-do" dispositions of start-up cultures in the creative industries, and the self-aggrandizement that supposedly leads to "establishing one's own brand" in order to get the job in the highly competitive, and competition-driven, commercial work environment. This is doubtless a challenge both for educating students in the core critical skills and values of their PhD training (the academic modesty and awareness of the limitations of one's knowledge and research that is not a reason for diffidence and self-doubt but rather a source of strength and pride, without producing any feelings of entitlement or superiority), and for educating the public and potential employers about the potential benefits of these skills and values.

7. **Academic jobs – Humanities PhD's for tenure track faculty positions.**

Anecdotal evidence from York graduates suggests that there is no disadvantage for interdisciplinary PhD's on the academic job market outside the limited circle of elite research universities that still hire in traditional disciplines. However, for university
teaching experience, York is challenged by limited course directorship opportunities. Most of the teaching experiences available are through teaching assistantships, guest lectures and teaching modules and certificates at a pan-university site, the Teaching Commons.

8. Professional skills development

There is a need to overcome an imaginary separation between preparing PhD students for academic jobs (understood as tenure-track faculty positions), on one hand, and giving them skills for other forms of gainful employment, on the other hand. Many forms of employment for PhD's who do not pursue the tenure-track faculty career pattern cover a spectrum of education, research and NGO work that draws on skills acquired in the course of the PhD. The PhD indicates, and must continue to signify, a step beyond professionalization; PhD's have demonstrated advanced skills in processing and synthesizing knowledge and integrating a detailed and careful examination of social and cultural phenomena into larger patterns, contexts, and levels of abstraction. As such, a PhD indicates the ability to lead projects and teams. Presentation and collaborative skills have been identified as most important for successful careers of PhD's, and need to be integrated into PhD programs, but with an understanding that this will not lead immediately to better job offers after graduation. While a PhD cannot be expected to open the first door into other careers, once a position has been acquired, a PhD is usually an asset for advancement to leadership positions. Professional skills development therefore cannot mean repeating (often outdated) models of career training and professionalisation. Rather, it should concentrate on mobilizing the strengths of PhD training for a wide variety of employment contexts in education, the public sector, NGO's, etc.

9. Consequences for rethinking coursework

Traditional course work is often riddled by narrow topics chosen by faculty, with little connection to students’ areas of specialization, especially in interdisciplinary environments with a wide range of topics that are best explored outside the restricted format of a graduate course. We suggest re-orienting course work towards academic skills that are transferable among topics, and complement those courses with more flexible formats after basic course work is completed. E.g., students could be required to regularly attend seminars or workshops with their supervisors throughout their studies in which they present the progress of their work and get input from fellow students who work under the same supervisor – a measure to alleviate the "loneliness of writing."

10. Rethinking the role of the dissertation

Current guidelines mandate that "dissertations must embody the results of original research and must be successfully defended at an oral examination. The doctoral dissertation must embody original work… and must constitute a significant contribution to knowledge. It should contain evidence of critical understanding of the relevant literature. The material embodied in the dissertation should merit publication."
A Humanities dissertation constitutes the pinnacle of a PhD candidate's research achievements. It presents the results of an original and solidly researched contribution to knowledge in a coherent format that is open to presentation to the academic community. As such, it is a valuable and core element of demonstrating the high-level qualifications of the candidate's individual research skills. We raise the question whether the current format of the dissertation as a single-authored, 250+-page extended manuscript that is based on individually researched material and forms the basis of a submission to an academic publisher can be modified to accommodate research practices in collaborative and interdisciplinary environments while maintaining the stringency and demands of the current format. Should equivalencies to the current format be introduced (such as co-authored dissertations, dissertations resulting from team projects, portfolio dissertations, cumulative article dissertations), there is a need to define more clearly the relevance and expectations of the current format.