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Rethinking Knowledge Arrangements: A Conversation about the English Program's Curriculum Grant

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List of Acronyms: GC=Graduate Center; ACLS=American Council of Learned Societies

NB: Hello listeners. Thank you for tuning into this PublicsLab archival interview. I'm [Nic Benacerraf](#), a former PublicsLab fellow and co-editor of the PublicsLab Archive. I am also a doctoral candidate in the Theatre and Performance Program at the CUNY Graduate Center, which is sometimes called the Grad Center, or simply the GC.

The following conversation showcases the work of faculty and students who received Doctoral Curriculum Enhancement Grants. The DCEGs funded specific initiatives proposed by programs across the GC, as they developed structural enhancements to advance the possibilities of public scholarship within their culture and curricula, and sought to make good on the GC's mission of "knowledge for the public good."

In this interview, Professor [Matt Gold](#) and PublicsLab fellow [Rob Yates](#) discuss how the curriculum grant awarded to the English program supported transformations to their coursework, examinations, mentorship, and professionalization curricula. Along the way, they consider how these multifaceted efforts to expand the doctoral curriculum intersect with the ongoing fight against legacies of white supremacy that remain embedded within our programs and institutions

I was hoping that each of you in your own voice could introduce yourself. Your name, your pronouns, your role in the project, and also at the CUNY Graduate Center in general. Matt, would you start?

MG: Sure. Hi, my name is Matt Gold. My pronouns are he/him/his, and I was part of the group of English students and faculty that worked on the PublicsLab grant at the GC. And I'm also a faculty member in English and a number of other programs including [Digital Humanities and Data Analysis and Visualization](#) at the Grad Center.

NB: Thank you. Rob?

RY: Yeah. My name is Rob Yates. I use they/he pronouns. I also was one of the members of the grant that worked within the English department. I'm also a doctoral candidate in the English department. And I was a member of the first cohort of the PublicsLab fellowship.

NB: Love to hear it. So, I was hoping we could start by setting the stage a little bit. How would you describe the issue that your project sought to address with the support of this grant? What drew you to submit the application?

MG: I think there were multiple things happening at once. So first of all, there was a sense and the reality that our graduate students were going into many different kinds of work after the degree than solely the professoriate. And as a program we were thinking about how our program structures and curriculum and milestones prepared students for careers other than faculty positions, recognizing that we probably weren't doing as good a job of that as we should, and wanting to address it in some way. So that was one of the main things I think that we were thinking about as we applied.

The other issue that we were thinking about was the inadequacy of knowledge arrangements and the histories of English as a discipline. Thinking about what we can do now, especially in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement. Thinking about the overrepresentation of whiteness in the program, both epistemologically and through the demographics of the program, and wanting to make a change. And we were thinking about how this grant could help us alter our curriculum, have conversations within the program about what we wanted and what kind of changes might be possible, and to think about how we could re-orient the program as a whole towards thinking about multiple publics as we did our work.

NB: How do these issues that you are experiencing relate to what you see in the field of English graduate programs in general in the US? What is the role of public scholarship in that space as you see it, and how is it transforming?

MG: So I come from this area of Digital Humanities, which I think has a vein of, kind of shared concern with the public humanities or public scholarship that is evidenced through an engagement through social media, through publication, and open access venues. And I would say, in both of these fields there has been growing --over the last couple of decades-- a realization that the Academy needs a much stronger engagement with multiple publics. And that the idea of specialists speaking to specialists at conferences and in monographs that few people read -- while there are important field-level discussions that need to take place in specific and very focused journals -- there's also a real need to reach out and for the academy more generally to try and engage the public.

A scholar whom I've been influenced by, [Kathleen Fitzpatrick](#), as well as GC faculty like Steve Breyer and others, have argued that this is especially important for public universities, especially at a moment when there's been a retraction of funding from the various states to public universities. The argument is that part of the reason that funding has been pulled back is that the work of the academy is not really legible to the larger public. And so we, we actually have a need for the continued health of public education and public institutions to ensure that we're not kind of keeping our expertise to ourselves in the work and the thinking that we're doing. But instead, we're engaging in larger dialogues and thinking about how the work that we're doing can engage multiple publics in multiple venues.

NB: Thank you. I'd love to hear about some of the solutions that you've imagined in the course of the grant. I know in your application you propose that you would make work in four main ways: "1) to research internship opportunities, 2) to fund visits by public humanities practitioners, 3) to rethink the dissertation, and 4) to revisit the aims

and structures of the program's doctoral examinations and other requirements." How would you walk us through this, which of those avenues proved the most fruitful to you?

RY: I definitely think as a student one outcome of these conversations was creating two new courses that are zero credit-bearing. One is Practice 1, the other is Practice 2 of the Discipline. In line with what we raised as some of the issues that we named within the application, I think those courses are meant to bring together graduate students at various times within their program to make space for engaging with this question of: if your intellectual work does not carry you further into the academy, what other venues might you pursue? What it might mean to make this choice to go and work within a different humanities institution, or some type of public service institution. I think especially for me and for our students, I think having a specific and clear space within these two courses has been a very important intervention within the degree itself.

MG: Yeah, I'd agree with that completely. So these two courses, one really focuses on helping students prepare work for various outcomes, whether it be a conference presentation, an op-ed, some sort of public writing, and thinking about how the work and the thinking that students are doing could reach venues other than an academic conference or an academic journal. So it's really helping students to think outside of a purely academic career itinerary.

And then the second class is really a re-shaping of the guidance that we give to students as they're thinking about the job market. So it involves bringing people in to talk about their experiences in nonprofits, in various cultural institutions, working in different kinds of jobs, secondary education... To speak to students about what their careers are like after getting a PhD in English. But also sharing with them different resources like [Imagine PhD](#) or [Versatile PhD](#) so that they could do some career explorations.

And then, we've re-envisioned what we think of as placement. So placement used to mean what academic job did a student get "placed" in. And now we're really thinking about it as a much broader set of possible career outcomes. We've really tried to change our messaging, so thinking about how [our website](#) represents career outcomes of students. And to really help students have support. I think one of the biggest changes here is really in terms of mentoring. When I went through graduate school myself, there, there was not all that much direct mentoring for the job search or even along the way to thinking about how the work one was doing for a classroom might wind up in other spaces. And I think the English program today is much more focused on helping students and providing scaffolding and support and mentoring along the way as they move their work from a seminar paper to some other outcome.

We did explore an internship credit-based course, but we've not moved on that yet. Although, we've definitely explored it and we definitely have students doing internships. And we've created a CUNY Academic Commons site to share advice and help and documentation for students who are going on the market.

And then I think just generally, we've also made many revisions with the help of this grant and also before to our First Exam. Decades ago, the First Exam in English used

to be, legend has it, about a 200-question multiple choice exam that was not unlike the GRE subject exam. Very detailed questions about canonical works, and it was really about testing students' knowledge of the literary canon. And I think over time we changed that to a more essay-based exam, and then we started to think about how we could move it towards an exam structure that would mirror the kinds of work students would be doing. Thinking about, how could a syllabus be part of what students submit for the exam? Or could a conference paper be part of what students would submit? And now we've almost changed it entirely towards a kind of mentoring process where students are submitting work and then they're meeting with a faculty member to talk it over.

So I think over time, our whole approach has shifted from one that is testing on a very specific domain of literary production, to a set of program structures that are meant to mentor and guide students through various parts of their writing process and their thinking process towards more concrete career outcomes.

NB: That seems really wide-reaching and like a global reconsideration of each of these different components of the degree. I'm also curious to ask about where you are in the progress of talking about the dissertation. I know that is often a longer term conversation for programs, and that was one of the four points that you sought to approach. Where are you at with that at this moment?

MG: We've had a small tradition of encouraging and fostering unconventional dissertation forms. It was within the last decade, Jesse Merandy, who's a graduate of our program, produced a mobile game based on Walt Whitman's life as his dissertation. And it was a completely born-digital project. He produced the game and then also he put the entire accompanying white paper online as well. We've had others work on this more recently, Jojo Karlin created an illustrated dissertation on Virginia Wolf.

The English faculty-- you know, one of the things that's I think pretty incredible and distinctive about our program is that although we absolutely have specialists in conventional periods of literary production, we also have many faculty who think broadly and in interdisciplinary ways about the work they do. And so we have many faculty and students who are published poets and scholars, and who are bringing both of those practices into their work and are producing proto-creative critical work.

RY: And to add onto that, this year one person in my cohort, Destry Sibley, won the ACLS inaugural Dissertation Innovation Award because she has a dissertation on mothers' memoirs across time that also has a podcast component. She herself produces podcasts for the New Yorker.

Within our department, more of the, if not barrier, more of the challenge is just recognizing that you need to think through what this different form might look like and then answer the question like, why? And what is it contributing to whichever audience or audiences you're wanting to reach?

NB: You know, I'm curious, since we're on the topic, how do you see these efforts that you've been on relating to other efforts at the Graduate Center towards fostering public humanities and its associated values?

MG: I think the PublicsLab and these kinds of curricular grants have been very helpful in

helping multiple programs move towards a reorientation of ways of thinking around academic work. And that's been not only within the specific programs that have gotten these grants, but has been part of a wider shift.

And so we have so many amazing, student-facing centers at the Grad Center that are part of this work. I'm part of [GC Digital Initiatives](#), which is really trying to work with students, to incorporate technology into their work and to explore new platforms. We have the [Teaching and Learning Center](#). We have the [Futures Initiative](#). We have the [Writing Center](#), the [Career Center](#), and the [Center for Humanities](#), all of which are pushing the boundaries on these public conversations that I think have begun to really produce a shift of momentum. One that I think the Graduate Center as a whole, honestly has embraced through its identification of itself as a public institution, serving the public good, serving the children of the whole people of the City of New York. There's been a realization that the Graduate Center is and should be the place to do this kind of work, and it's been great to see these efforts come together from so many different angles, so many different departments, so many different centers.

Also, you know, I do wanna say that we undertook this as part of a team. So we had Kandice Chuh, who at the time when this grant was put together was Executive Officer, or Chair, of our department, really kind of drove the energy for a lot of it. We had [Tanya Agathocleous](#) who is our DEO, and this year was our co-EO and also Queenie Sukhadia, who was also I think part of the PublicsLab. And Rob. This was very much a team effort. So I just want to thank the larger team and also thank the PublicsLab. Thank you Nic, and thank you [Stacy](#). And thank you team.

NB: Mmm. Thanks for shouting out your team.

RY: On my end, I see this grant-work as doing a lot of the intellectual and philosophical work of why this matters. If we do think of ourselves as a public university that is committed to deep and creative avenues of study, then what does it mean to think about expressions of scholarship and learning that is untraditional in form, recognizable to some audiences and not others? Why do those audiences matter? And I think that also comes back to those questions around racial equity and racial justice. And I see the work that these grants make possible as really critical to both -- not just critique, but add character and add more meaning behind the institution as it broadcasts these various projects. And I think the graduates leave with a much stronger sense of, I'm not just doing this for more people to just look at my work, but rather I believe that my work should be read and engaged with by not just an academic elite, but rather a wider set of communities.

NB: I wanna throw in a question I didn't plan on. I can't help but notice that all three of us look fairly white and have "he" as at least one of our pronouns. And I was curious if there's anything specific about the positionality there that changes what the work is for you, and what it means to show up in these spaces?

MG: Yeah, I think that for me as a white, cis man with he/him pronouns, the main thing is to be active in the discussions and to take part in them, and to think about how for us in the English department, how the field of English has embedded within it structures of white supremacy. One of the things I think a grant like this and a project like this can help one think about, is what is the culture of our program and to what extent is it

hospitable to diverse voices and people and how well are our students and faculty of color doing in this program? And to what extent does the structure of it encourage success and happiness and worth and encourage positive discussions and wellbeing within the program? For me, within my positionality, one of the main things is to try not to shy away from those discussions that may be uncomfortable, but instead to take part in them to support students however I can. And to really learn to live with the the discomfort, I think, that comes from trying to face structures of white supremacy that are part of the discipline, part of the institution, and part of the country. Part of the world.

RY: I think for me, I see it evident that it's often women of color in departments that do like a lot of labor. That it's not just the academic work that everyone is doing, but also, a lot of mentoring and a lot of providing necessary care for graduate students, often, but not always, is from other students of color. Often, I have absolutely, as a white person, been cared for by many of the faculty of color within our program. And so I see being part of this work, as a white person, as a necessary step of action to say, "Yes, I agree that we see these issues within our program, and I would like to contribute my labor in this type of way to--to work, and make this a better place".

NB: So as we wrap up, I was curious if you have any words of advice for anyone else out there in similar positions, looking to do the work, but at their university? Clearly they'll be facing a lot of the same barriers that you have. Do you have any words that you want to share with them?

MG: I'm a fan of the way that this opportunity was structured. What it did is it kind of incentivized programs to think for themselves about what they could do to make changes in the culture and structure of their programs and departments. And then the programs, proposed activities. And now we're here on the other side and looking at all of this great work that came out of it that I think does change the culture. We all, I think, would wish for a larger single shift that sometimes seems like it can only happen through a top-down directive, but that's not effective because faculty and departments have their own unique cultures. And so I think one of the things to think about for others is, how and where within the existing structures of your work and your department can you encourage experimentation? So where are people willing to go that you can support them? I think that model is terrific and is pretty much the best way to think about how to produce cultural changes within existing and sometimes rigid academic structures.

NB: Thank you, and I just want to reiterate for our listeners that this grant was only \$8,000. You know, a lot of the times we think that we need hundreds of thousands of dollars to make a change. That we're talking about foundational support that is transformative. But, I think what's so beautiful from this conversation is to hear how the drive pre-exists the funding, to hear how by supporting people already engaged in the work, there's so much opening up that can be accomplished in the university, that benefits us all. So I just want to thank both of you for your time today, for your generosity and vulnerability, and for sharing a bit about what makes your program so special.

RY: Yeah. Thanks Nic. That was great.

NB: In this interview, we discussed several people who are the subject of their own PublicsLab interviews. They include Kandice Chuh [[link to interview](#)] and Queenie Sukhadia [[link to interview](#)] from the English program, as well as the interview between Stacy Hartman and Bianca Williams [[link to interview](#)], heads of the PublicsLab, who share their parting thoughts. Check it out.

The PublicsLab was an initiative at the GC that supported the transformation of graduate education through fellowships for doctoral students, [Curriculum Enhancement Grants](#) for departments and programs, and programming for all that showcased and workshopped the methods and practices of public scholarship.

It was funded from 2018 to 2023 by the Mellon Foundation. [Stacy Hartman](#) was the Director of the program, [Professor Bianca Williams](#) served as its Faculty Lead, [Professor Kandice Chuh](#) Interim Faculty Lead, and [Professor David Olan](#) was the grant's principal investigator.

Our archive features audio interviews with student fellows, faculty mentors, grant recipients, and the program's leadership.