



Casting Public Imagination for the Evolving Major

A decline in the English major is a crisis not of marketing but rather of public imagination, argues Jennifer Clifton.

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Several months ago, a [report](#) by the Association of Departments of English raised some concerns that warrant a second look, especially given our current political moment. The times make it clear: we are facing a deep crisis of imagination in public life. Our inability to imagine the interests and experiences of other people limits not only how we understand domestic and global citizenship but also how we enact that citizenship with others. I contend that many of the logics and practices underlying this version of public life are perpetuated -- among other places -- in English classrooms.

While the ADE report advises departments to initiate or continue conversations about “the organizing principles for the major,” the overall thrust of the report seems, to my mind, to frame this work as a marketing strategy for justifying a major, most often focused on literary history, by advocating “three categories: skills, career prospects and disciplinary content.” Sometimes this rebranding results in adding employment-oriented tracks “catchy” enough to keep enrollment up while preserving the status quo. But this is insufficient to reinvigorate the major. Furthermore, I would argue that a decline in the major is a crisis not of marketing but rather of public imagination.

Some of the most urgent concerns we’re dealing with on a regular basis are: the degradation of black, brown and indigenous lives; the deployment of bots and algorithms to heighten in-group loyalties and cross-group tensions; the circulation

of false moral equivalencies; “fake news” and outright lies; gaslighting as a primary means of avoiding shared reasoning; an inability to bridge vibrant, volatile differences; the systematic unraveling of public institutions; the privatization of public resources; and a sometimes debilitating sense of deep uncertainty and precarity. Those of us in English departments are implicated in the predicaments of our time and also specially poised to lay claim to the pragmatic promise and practice of public life, a fragile and aspirational experiment in cooperative interdependence. In such tumultuous times, I note an inclination for faculty members to become angry and to engage in behind-the-scenes mobilizing. That is necessary but also insufficient.

Public life is always a pedagogical project -- and an imaginative and aspirational one at that. It is about envisioning and bringing about what could be but is not yet. And what could be is an open question, one that -- at least in democratic public life -- requires that we listen and learn with and from one another and that we pragmatically, iteratively invent pathways and possibilities with others in ways that make our lives go.

Certainly, the question of how to configure and name a major associated with what is still broadly labeled English studies is a complex question and one that many others have taken up. As the ADE report noted, different colleges and universities with varying aims, resources and missions will need to continue tackling the question of how to configure majors, minors, certificates and tracks differently. But my argument here is not about the important issues of institutional configurations or historical labor politics or what to name departments that might include literary studies, rhetoric and writing studies, literacy studies, English education, creative writing, technical and professional writing, linguistics, TESOL, user experience, and digital media. Instead, I am arguing that public imagination and rhetorical invention, so sorely needed in public life, should be central organizing principles in our majors, minors, concentrations and tracks -- however those are configured.

Outside the academy, many people are recognizing the need for cultivating the connection between the literary imagination and public life. They are turning, for example, to classic dystopian novels like *1984* or *The Handmaid's Tale* to account for the rise of and response to authoritarian regimes; to memoirs

like *Hillbilly Elegy* to make sense of the inclinations of white voters in rural industrial areas; to poetry and prose like *The Forgetting Tree* to explore the experiences and effects of racial violence; or to collections of personal narratives like *Green Card Youth Voices* to better understand the experiences of immigrant and New American youth. As political ethicist Martha Nussbaum argues in *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, literature of all kinds offers readers an entry into considering “human aspirations and particular forms of social life that either enable or impede those aspirations, shaping them powerfully in the process.” For public life, it is crucial that we treat this intersection first as a site of inquiry, wonder and deliberation -- even before it is a site of critique.

Part of what stories and poetry offer us in their rendering -- rather than explaining -- of experience is the possibility of a bond or at least a sympathetic understanding of familiar and unfamiliar others as well as of the logics and experiences, desire and pain that inform who and what they are becoming. For public life, certainly the capacity to connect across differences is important. The capacity to reason together in the face of dis-identification and lack of understanding is even more crucial and requires far more deliberate, well-tooled cultivation.

The ADE report suggests writing studies might provide inspiration for reinvigorating the major, and yet here, too, I would advise caution. After all, undergraduate writing instruction -- and literary instruction, too, for that matter -- too often still relies on claim-driven argument that strives to make a strong point, to use evidence and to appeal to logic, yet rarely brings about changes in minds, practices or policies. It too often still relies on assimilationist models of language and on writing as an individual enterprise rather than collaborative knowledge building. It too often still frames rhetorical education as a “Defense Against the Dark Arts” -- a kind of analytical jujitsu that teaches students to pick apart others’ arguments while upholding their own. And it too often still promulgates a circulation model of public life -- one premised on gaining greater audiences or amassing shares and likes. That model stands in contrast to a localized rhetorical one that engages in the gritty work of inventing astute social practices and productive self-other relations capable of making possible joint inquiry and

invention around to-some-degree-shared concerns -- even across deep differences.

There is a real human need for us to teach writing “as a practical, intellectual activity aimed at clarifying problems, risks, and possibilities we face as humans and societies, and at contributing to social and political praxis,” in the words of Bent Flyvbjerg in *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*. This well-tooled, collaborative orientation toward public life means that context and judgment -- both central to understanding and taking human action -- must also be central to our writing pedagogy.

More specifically, embracing uncertainty, difference and conflict as inevitable and valuable components of constructing context and making judgments *with others* - - not only or primarily against others -- must be part of our pedagogical work to foster invention for real-world writing that aims at getting something done. This is a shift equally concerned with outcomes and with justice.

Orienting writing toward public imagination and collaborative knowledge building would also have us see limitations -- in our ways of relating, in the practices and policies of our institutions, in our understandings of complex issues -- as fulcrums on which to launch inquiry and invention, leveraging writing to:

- re-see a situation;
- make the personal shared;
- construct shared concerns;
- construct more complex understandings of localized issues;
- engage others’ ideas and experiences;
- network arguments that travel and flip as they circulate;
- create public forums;
- listen across difference;
- analyze, evaluate, imagine and invent alternatives;
- generate public dialogue;
- construct intercultural inquiry;
- engage in productive problem solving; and
- construct wise action in uncertain circumstances.

My primary aim isn’t to critique the current ways we’ve leveraged English studies within the humanities. Rather, my goal is to spur us to consider a productive

orientation toward public life as central to the pedagogical work of English studies in higher education, however that is configured. Of course, this also necessitates a collaborative and imaginative orientation toward one another in our own departments. English studies has a special and significant role to play in shaping public life and everyday citizenship through the ways students learn to engage with others across deep differences.

I'm not alone in wrestling with these concerns. Nor is this challenge something individual scholars can solve, nor a single discipline. Rather, there is a public need within the academy for collaborative imagining, inventing, reasoning and problem solving together -- the very work that is perhaps most needed for rich participation in public life. We must do more than simply recreate the structural problem of change or cannibalize disciplines and subfields or fragment into a myriad of marketing niches. Instead, this moment calls for the invention of collaborative practices and of alternative discourses, sustained over time with one another to encourage public imagination and create a publicly responsive infrastructure.

http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2019/01/03/academe-needs-cultivate-connection-between-imagination-and-public-life-opinion?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=05ec395b2d-WNU_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-05ec395b2d-199133009&mc_cid=05ec395b2d&mc_eid=6f67a838c9