Report from the Field

Why Writing Matters: Helping Students Rethink the Value of English and Writing Studies

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Genesis of the Project

English departments across the United States are working to attract students to their programs. In light of *A Changing Major: The Report of the 2016–17 ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the English Major,* which affirms the declining pursuit of undergraduate English degrees since 2009 and the efforts of departments to change this trend (Cartwright, Chinn, Stanley, Laurence, & Stewart, 2018), or any number of other reports, journal articles, and studies on the topic, there is an understanding, an acceptance really, that today's college students are questioning the usefulness and value of English studies, including composition and writing courses. In the preface to the July 2018 ADE report, MLA Executive Director Paula Krebs asserted, "it's time to use the data we have to make real changes in our outreach, in the cases we are making for our majors, and even in our departmental structures and curricula" (Cartwright et al., 2018, "A Note from the Executive Director," para. 2). But how can we prompt students to rethink the value of an English or writing studies degree? What pedagogical approach might engage students in discussions about why writing matters?

These two questions became the focus of a summer research project led by the faculty member in the professional writing program and an advanced graduate research assistant. We wanted to find a pedagogical approach and create related materials for students in composition and general education courses about the academic, professional, civic, and personal opportunities afforded through English studies degree programs and courses. While we recognize that English studies provides a range of courses relevant to students' academic and professional endeavors, we placed the most emphasis on the desire for college graduates to have stronger writing skills. Initially, we aimed simply to create a set of presentation materials that faculty members could incorporate into their curricula to attract students to our major and minor programs. We envisioned putting forth logical arguments for first-year students to convince them that writing matters and that English studies is a viable option to prepare them for the job market. What we found, however, was that the materials would not be enough: we also needed students to better understand the needs of today's employers and critically *rethink* how they will reach their personal and professional goals. In addition, we, as researchers, had to explore how the message had been delivered in the past in order to find a new pathway for these discussions.

This report from the field has three foci: first, an overview of the foundational information that created the research questions; second, the use of critical thinking and critical pedagogy to understand how English and writing studies prepare students for a

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range of different careers; and third, a look to future project development plans. The goal of our project is to create an approach that reveals to students the ways that English and writing studies provide access to the development of highly desired skills and many different employment opportunities. We elected to share this information at this point in the project as we are aware that many of our colleagues are also addressing the value of English studies as a discipline. Concepts of critical thinking are essential to this project for us as researchers and for the students endeavoring to plan their college and professional lives. Irvin Peckham (2010) in *Going North Thinking West: The Intersections of Social Class, Critical Thinking, and Politicized Writing Instruction* explained that critical thinking is "an informed look at something. . . . examining available information and drawing intelligent conclusions through analyzing, synthesizing, preferably from a relatively disinterested point of view" (p. 52). Referencing the work of John Dewey, Peckham argued that critical thinking pedagogies are effective because students "rely on what they could discover rather than what they had been told" (p. 53). This definition and application of critical thinking guides the work of this project by moving it from the dissemination of data to a place of collaborative learning and revelation.

Considering Data to Build the Project's Foundation

Despite our commitment to explore new messaging practices for engaging with students, the starting point for our project was the collection of relevant data. For example, statistics published by the American Association of Colleges and Universities in *It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success* supported our arguments. The degree itself was not the primary focus of employers, as shown by assertions such as "Nearly all those surveyed (93%) agree, 'a candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major. . . .' [and] 'More than three in four employers say they want colleges to place *more emphasis* on helping students develop five key learning outcomes . . . [including] written and oral communication'" (Hart, 2013, p. 1). We took from this not necessarily each of the specific skills detailed but the fact that employers are not primarily seeking students with degrees that directly align with a specific job title or vocational track. Evidence from the wealth of qualitative and quantitative research on this and related topics was available to support our somewhat simple arguments that writing matters and that English studies can help students develop sought-after skills and abilities. However, what we fell into at the start of this project was the tendency to lean on a familiar and somewhat basic set of deductive arguments. Below is one such example:

First Premise:	Employers do not care what your major is; they care that you can write.
Second Premise:	An English program will teach you how to write.
Conclusion:	Therefore, you should pursue an English degree to be more appealing to employers.

This argumentative approach was not sufficiently motivating students, as evidenced by the continuing decline in enrollment in English degree programs. Joining the content from the 2018 ADE report is data available through *Humanities Indicators, A Project of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences*, which also affirm that the number of individuals completing

English degrees has fluctuated for decades. While the number of completed English degrees experienced an increase in the 1960s, there was a dramatic decline in the 1980s before a slight resurgence in the 1990s. The current decline has been particularly significant since 2009: the only humanities degree programs to experience notable growth since this time have been in communications, with an eight percent increase (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2017).

Perhaps the number of students pursuing a communications degree is growing because students assume it is more applicable to a professional setting or provides more practical skills than what is perceived as a vague, traditional English degree. A recent perusal of advertisements with "communications" as a part of the job title—for example, communications specialist, social media communications associate, digital communications coordinator, and communications officer—revealed required skills and experiences not exclusively germane to students in communications programs. The expertise desired by employers often included writing, editing, and proofreading; independent and collaborative work experience; familiarity with style manuals and formatting concerns; and knowledge of digital publishing and social media platforms. These qualifications are foci of development for many humanities programs, including specifically English and writing studies. Helping students discover the range of degree programs that provide instruction and experience in these areas is essential to prompt rethinking of their courses of study.

Louis Menand (2010) in *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* recognized the pre-professional focus of many students in the selection of their degree programs. He argued that the value of humanities degrees has been in question because there are not always straight lines between college majors and career paths. Menand contended that this can be traced to curricular decisions made in the late nineteenth century by the president of Harvard University, Charles William Eliot. Under Eliot's direction, Harvard changed the structure of academic degree programs by making a bachelor's degree a prerequisite for admission to medical and law schools; the undergraduate degree was now considered a distinctively separate facet—a preparatory stage—of one's college pursuits, occurring before career education and training. Menand saw the change as essentially professionalizing the professions (p. 47), as it required students to obtain additional professional training through formal education programs after completion of bachelor degrees.

Menand explained that these curricular changes have impacted twenty-first-century humanities degree programs because they resulted in "the idea that liberal arts education is by its nature divorced from professional education" (2010, pp. 49–50), and many students today want the investment in college to lead directly to jobs and income. Consideration of Menand's theories was useful for us to better understand what contributed to narratives undermining the value of humanities, and specifically English, degrees; however, it was Menand's assessment of what a humanities program offers students that prompted a new direction for our project: "[Humanities] is pursuing an ongoing inquiry into the limits of inquiry. And it is not just asking questions about knowledge; it is creating knowledge by asking the questions. Skepticism about the forms of knowledge is itself a form of knowledge" (p. 92).

In considering how knowledge is generated, we started to rethink the project. Our aim was to develop materials to help college students understand the value and opportunities within English and writing studies, but as we reflected on our own experiences

in college and professional settings outside of universities, we were prompted to analyze what brought us to English studies. What arguments, data, and knowledge motivated us? How were they presented? Why were they persuasive? What we found was that it was not data or a simple deductive argument that pulled us to English studies, but rather individual understandings of where we wanted to situate ourselves both academically and professionally. As Stanley Aronowitz (2019) wrote in the foreword to *Critical Pedagogy in Uncertain Times: Hope and Possibilities,* a goal of education is "self-reflection, that is realizing the famous poetic phrase 'know thyself,' which is an understanding of the world . . . its economic, political and, equally important, its psychological dimensions" (p. ix). Through these considerations, we found that Peckham's definition of critical thinking and tenets of critical pedagogy might offer an approach for reaching twenty-first-century college students to help them rethink the place of writing in their academic and professional careers.

The Role of Reflection in Shaping Research Questions

While we worked to find ways to develop arguments that would prompt students to rethink the value of writing and English studies programs, we repeatedly found ourselves reflecting upon facets of our personal and professional lives that informed the selection of our academic paths. We sensed that our experiences might provide insights that would be valuable in addition to the critical thinking and pedagogical practices we wanted to explore. Using an autoethnographic approach, we created narratives that unveiled the primary influences on our individual academic decisions. Sarah Wall (2008) explained, "autoethnography offers a way of giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding" (p. 39). Carolyn Ellis (2009) argued "reexamining the events we have lived through and the stories we have told about them previously allows us to expand and deepen our understandings of the lives we have lead, the culture in which we lived, and the work we have done" (p. 13). This method of research allowed us to explore our lives as undergraduate and graduate students in order to discern effective arguments and approaches that could serve our work with today's students. In addition, this could prove to be an effective research method for others undertaking similar projects. Herein we include excerpts from the reflections captured in our autoethnographies that led us to consider how to facilitate the rethinking of English and writing majors and the pedagogical approaches that could govern these discussions.

An Undergraduate Finding English Studies—Reflections from Shannan Rivera

As someone who loved reading and writing growing up, I never questioned the value of an English course. I felt like the ability to tell stories, express thoughts coherently, and captivate an audience were skills that spoke for themselves. However, through my undergraduate and graduate coursework, I came to realize that my attitude toward English studies was not the norm.

When I told people that I wanted to study English, they assumed that I would teach. Even I assumed I would teach. Teaching was not only the obvious option, but also it seemed like the only option at that time for a student like me: one who loved reading and writing. When applying to college, I selected one that I knew had an excellent education program, and I declared my interest as English Education. My advanced placement credits allowed me to speed through my general education requirements, and I quickly found myself in

introductory English studies courses where I was studying alongside both students pursuing a BA in English and those in the English Education program.

Looking back on that time in my undergraduate studies, I recognize that I was curious about those English majors at the desks near mine because, up until that point in my education, every time I had expressed an interest in pursuing an English major, I was pointed toward teaching. But here were students who, like me, loved reading, writing, and research, but they had no plans to teach. I wondered, "What were these students going to do with their degrees if they were not planning to teach?" They could not teach without the education certification, so what other career opportunities were available to them? Finally, I decided to ask, and the English majors I spoke with opened my mind to a world of possibilities. They told me that English majors could do anything that involved words. Interestingly, I recall now that they rattled off skills and different career options associated with an English degree in a very practiced manner: one that I am now sure was developed from the many times they had to justify their degree to their family and friends. I was fascinated by the idea that I could find a career path that allowed me to just work with words. Based on these conversations and some follow-up research, I changed my major the next semester from English Education to English studies.

I went through the rest of my undergraduate career developing my own practiced explanation as to how my skills were valuable and what I could do with them. I graduated with a full-time job opportunity where my writing and editing skills were highly valued. After a few months in my position, I was promoted and responsible for finding other writers to create website content alongside me. This experience brought me to reviewing application materials that lacked evidence of strong writing skills, and I wondered how people could question the value of an English degree when graduates from other disciplines could not clearly articulate their skills and abilities in a document as short and important as a cover letter. When I returned to school for a graduate degree and taught first-year composition, I started to understand the disconnect and explored how I could motivate students to value composition classes and other English courses.

I was told in my graduate pedagogy classes that my students were going to resist writing and that I was not going to have a classroom full of English studies lovers like myself. I took that information with a grain of salt but was convinced that I could persuade my students about the importance of writing by drawing on my own professional experience of reading and rejecting applications that did not show strong writing abilities. I got into my class and told all my student that composition would be the most relevant general education class they would take because they would have to write no matter what position they found themselves in, and I was met with indifferent expressions. I tried to reiterate my point by talking about my professional work experience and that only seemed to convince them that I was going to be a tough grader.

I knew I had been warned, but I still could not understand why the students did not believe (or did not care about) what I was telling them about the value of writing skills. I wanted to write it off as generational, but, reflecting on my own undergraduate career, I knew so many people who did not value or care to learn writing skills. So, knowing from my professional experience how much strong writing matters and understanding from my academic experience as a graduate teaching assistant how challenging it is to motivate students, I have landed here, in this project, trying to find new ways to impress upon students the importance of using first-year composition courses to develop the writing skills that will

benefit them in their professional endeavors and to motivate them to consider the opportunities available in English studies.

An Industry Professional Returning to English Studies—Reflections from Lara Smith-Sitton

Like Shannan, when I started my undergraduate degree, I came to college with a love of writing and reading, but I felt I needed to connect this to a career path. Most of my peers were pursuing business degrees with plans to work in accounting firms or science degrees with goals of medical school. The closest job title I could identify with was that of a journalist. When I opted to attend a small liberal arts college without a communications department or journalism degree option, English studies seemed to be the best alternative, but I was concerned that I would not be able to move into a writing position for a media outlet. Nonetheless, this was the major I selected.

When I moved from college into industry, I was confident in my skills and abilities as a writer, researcher, and communicator, but I did not pursue work as a journalist. Instead, I applied my writing skills first in small privately held organizations and later in large multinational, publicly held corporations. I often started in support roles, but my oral and written communication skills opened doors to advanced positions. As my responsibilities shifted from content development to managerial oversight of others, I started to realize that very smart, well-educated young professionals struggled with producing deliverables that were well-written and usable. I began to question how these bright individuals, many with graduate degrees from highly ranked business schools, continually fell short in the areas of written and oral communication. The result was that I, and often my administrative support, were left to rework, develop, and rewrite the materials submitted. I began to question how I and my staff had developed the skills needed without the advantages of graduate school educations. What I found was that those whom I depended upon the most were often English majors.

Ultimately, I sought to learn more about the kinds of pedagogical approaches and degree programs that might best prepare individuals for the rigors of professional careers dependent upon writing and research. I connected my personal abilities to my English studies coursework. In addition, I found my experiences as an intern and work in community spaces helped me see and understand the kinds of work I needed to be prepared to engage with outside of the classroom. As I witnessed organizations focusing recruiting efforts on pre-professional, linear track programs situated in business schools and communications programs, I had a desire to explore how English studies could have a seat at the table in hiring and recruitment discussions. That brought me back to graduate school after many years in industry. My work focuses not only on helping students better understand what is needed by today's employers but also how individuals with a love of reading, writing, and research have unique and needed skills by public and private sector organizations.

In my position at Kennesaw State University, I am charged with building experiential learning opportunities that move students from classrooms to the community for internships and community-engaged projects. My work takes me from campus to the offices of organizations in many different industries to help create opportunities for English and professional writing students to explore the value of their degree programs. At the same time, I work to help students discern the professional possibilities that exist for those who are competent communicators in written and oral forms across a variety of modalities. Yet, what I find is students who have a strong need to write or research or read as a part of their

daily lives are much more open to the possibility of the unknowns of careers paths with an English degree—they are willing to pursue their passions and confidently wait to see where they will lead them. The majority of students, and employers, quite frankly, are still primarily looking at job titles or degree programs that seem to "train" students for careers. As Shannan and I started this project, I hoped her background both in industry and as a college student who was convinced to pursue a BA in English without a determined career path would result in an approach that might motivate students in new ways. While we started the project with deliverables in mind, our rhetoric and composition pursuits took us to a different place: we reflected; we researched; we uncovered an approach that we could adapt; we changed the focus of our project.

Intersections of Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy

Creating autoethnographic narratives about our experiences were exercises in critical thinking. Peckham's definition of critical thinking emphasized analysis of facts and information in order to reach conclusions. We recognized that we needed to employ an approach that emphasized motivating students to engage with the information shared and then rethink the range of academic degree options that could support their professional goals. After reflecting on our own academic paths, we both are confident that information about careers and professional opportunities with English degrees was available to us, but it did not permeate our decision-making. If professors or others with authority in our academic lives verbalized these important details, we did not make note of what they said. What changed our minds was confidence in our talents, abilities, and passions as undergraduates. In addition, we found ourselves in communities with other like-minded peers. We actually responded when there was a shift in power structures: we, like our peers, could pursue degree programs that we believed were valuable and important, regardless of what cultural and societal voices told us about the unemployable futures we might face. The critical thinking about our academic and professional paths occurred when we were intrinsically motivated to consider our options with knowledge and data we discovered.

Considering this now, we both see how power, cultural, and political structures informed and shaped our educational decisions at the start of our undergraduate careers. There were voices of authority pushing us towards pre-professional, practical coursework that did not align with our interests. We wanted to read, write, and research in English studies about topics related to literature, rhetoric, and history. We were not interested in courses with clear vocational structures; we wanted the freedom to make connections between coursework and the work we explored outside of our classrooms. This is what happens when critical pedagogy joins the learning process.

We saw through our autoethnographic reflections that we were empowered as students. This, in turn, prompted us to evaluate how our work as teachers, particularly as we worked to share the value of and need for English majors, could be more effective if we stopped articulating narratives that focused on persuading students and instead allowed students to share with us their concerns and expectations about their professional goals. John Dewey (1938/1997) in *Experience and Education* explained that educators must "be able to judge what attitudes are actually conducive to continued growth and what are detrimental. He must, in addition, have the sympathetic understanding of individuals as individuals which gives him an idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning" (p. 39). Our deductive arguments were falling short because our students'

minds, like ours long ago, could not absorb the data dropped within the format of our arguments. We were preaching not listening.

Paulo Freire (1985) explained in an interview titled "Rethinking Critical Pedagogy: Dialogue with Paulo Freire":

> The very practice of teaching involves learning on the part of those we are teaching, as well as learning, or relearning, on the part of those who teach.
>
> I can experience others in a real learning situation where the object of knowledge becomes a critical agent, rather than a possession. This kind of situation mediates the critical agent, the educators and the learners. It is impossible to experience and appreciate someone in this concrete relationship if the educator and learner do not know about one another, if they do not teach one another. (p. 177)

The application of Freire's work in critical pedagogy may seem illogical for efforts to educate students about careers and professional opportunities; however, we actually see rich opportunities for his theories to empower students to push aside dominant narratives measuring the value of a college education by the job title assigned upon graduation. Students can then consider the currency of professional pursuits that align with personal interests and desires. A recent study to understand undergraduate students confirms that when students are making choices about their academic paths and coursework, they perform better, as "their intrinsic motivation to engage with the material is likely to carry them through to success" (Popovic and Green, 2012, p. 129). Student perceptions about what they need as learners is tied to self-efficacy; as professors, we "might be wasting our energies if we try to persuade students of the relevance or validity of particular beliefs about learning. What's more likely to be influential, though, is helping students shift their *behaviors*" (Popovic and Green, p. 175).

Popovic and Green (2012), like Peckham, recognized that prompting students to employ critical thinking practices about connections between academic and professional plans is a better approach than simply disseminating data and expecting students to accept what we have discerned and believe is important. This connects back to an essential component of Peckham's definition of critical thinking that emphasizes giving students room to make their own discoveries from relevant information. We can share data about the job market and needed qualifications, but students need to be involved in constructing the conclusions from what is shared. Freire's work in critical pedagogy then joins Peckham's considerations of critical thinking by emphasizing the importance of reciprocity in teaching: as faculty members, we are not only to share knowledge and facilitate structures for intellectual discovery but also to learn from our students and affirm their knowledge. We can learn how to better articulate the relevancy of writing and English studies degree programs when the approach includes critical thinking and pedagogy.

While this may seem an obvious approach to many of our colleagues, it may not be the approach most commonly reached to for encouraging students to think critically about degree programs. In an interview Sheila L. Macrine conducted with Ira Shor, entitled "What is Critical Pedagogy Good For?", their conversation provides support for this theoretical approach to empower students through discussions that invite their ideas and thoughts to create new knowledge and discovery: "discourse is a material force in the social construction

of self and society, such public spheres are instruments for the democratic construction of self-in-society and society-in-self" (Macrine, 2009, p. 121). Shor, like Freire, contended that we can recognize and push back against the political structures that force answers on students with a reciprocal effort of collaborative learning. While Shor may have been describing public spheres beyond a college campus, where discussion can lead to social or political action, we envisioned classroom or other academic settings as the public spaces for our project. Here, through independent and collaborative thinking, we hoped students would share knowledge, discoveries, and new conclusions with the others present.

Considering the collaborative learning aspects of critical pedagogy, our project shifted from delivering data for persuasion to creating spaces where we could learn from students about their professional interests and perceptions about the kinds of writing, reading, analysis, and research skills they may need for their professional and personal lives. We see this as shifting power to the students so that they can articulate their career goals and interests as well as their knowledge about degree programs and areas of study. Our presentations then became collaborative spaces where we freely exchanged ideas and information.

Looking to the Future and Project Development

Our field report shares the work of a summer program to find a theoretical approach that could shape and inform one English department's goal to help students gain a better understanding of the needs and demands of today's employers in a wide range of industries and professions. The autoethnographies, coupled with data and pedagogical research, resulted in a pilot project where the presentation is not a data-driven PowerPoint led by a person in authority but rather an interactive discussion where students share their professional goals and what they know about the career paths that they would like to pursue. Components of the class presentations include the following elements:

- large group discussion highlighting key data from current research about the abilities most desired by employers, with a focus primarily on writing and learning outcomes from composition and English studies courses (10 minutes);
- small group conversations where students discuss the specific career paths they would like to pursue and both share and discover the kinds of writing needed in career paths identified (10 minutes);
- small group interactions with a facilitator, focused on what students perceive about writing, followed by collaboratively generating questions about what students might need to know about the skills for their desired careers (10 minutes);
- large group presentation that invites students to share knowledge and questions discovered through the small group exercises, with time for student-led queries and thoughts (20 minutes).

Resources for further research and conversation are shared with students, including a sign-up sheet for departmental outreach materials at the end of the session. The goal is to challenge students to see themselves in their lives beyond college and help them prepare for

the journeys by encouraging them to pursue needed knowledge and information as well as a deeper sense of self-awareness.

Research is needed to measure the effectiveness of this approach and refine the pedagogy employed, and this will be forthcoming. In the meantime, we can report that when this project was informally implemented in a composition course and a large literature course, students were remarkably engaged with the material. They were not focused on their phones or working on other projects—the students shared personal stories and knowledge about careers and interests. In addition, they asked lots of questions of each other and the facilitator, which led to a lively discussion about English and writing studies. English faculty report that many students have reached out to learn more about our major and minor programs. In a period when resources of time and funding are limited, this project has allowed us to consider how we can change the conversation around English studies by utilizing a theoretical and practical approach rooted in critical thinking and pedagogy. An essential facet of our approach considered Peckham's (2010) thoughts about critical thinking: "we need to give them alternative ways of thinking and writing that fit the new social [and employment] situations in which they will increasingly find themselves" (p. 50). We recognize that this project is still in the beginning stages, but we believe this approach will prompt students to engage with these discussions and rethink the data surrounding college degrees and professional careers.

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