

Issues Concerning the Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Theatre

**Based on Discussions of the
NAST Working Group on the Ph.D. in Theatre
and the NAST Membership**

National Association of Schools of Theatre

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I. Introduction

This study paper provides an annotated list of issues discussed during meetings of the NAST Working Group on the Ph.D. in Theatre in 2000 and 2001. It also contains issues discussed in open membership meetings on the same topic from 2000 to 2002. These meetings, discussions, and this study paper are all part of a long-term analysis of graduate education in theatre being undertaken by NAST. The Association's purpose is to explore issues with a view to helping faculties and administrations make the best possible decisions in their local situations and circumstances.

II. The Doctor of Philosophy in Theatre

The Ph.D. in Theatre has played an important role in building theatre programs in higher education. It continues to give scholars and scholar practitioners a credential that has credibility in hiring, promotion, and tenure situations. The Ph.D. in Theatre seems widely understood as a research degree. However, definitions, types, and emphases on research in programs does not follow a standardized approach. Any review of the Ph.D. in Theatre must take the fact of variation into account. There may be even more variation in the future, as graduate study evolves in all disciplines. Various changes are producing actions and reactions. Calls for experimentation are answered with questions about maintaining quality. All these forces and the concerns they raise keep focusing on the field on how important the Ph.D. is. The points and issues raised in these discussions and listed below do not have their sources in feelings of crisis, but rather from responsibilities for stewardship. The Ph.D. in Theatre needs to be sustained as it evolves, as new content, processes, and purposes develop.

III. Content

There seems to be agreement that:

- All Ph.D. programs should require that the student demonstrate the ability to conduct independent research at a high level, leading to completion of a dissertation which is defended before a committee of scholars.
- The student should demonstrate proficiency in the tools necessary to carry out this research, including but not limited to computer skills (technology) and reading knowledge of a foreign language.

- The student should demonstrate mastery of the subject matter in his/her field before a committee of scholars.

This particular body of knowledge and skills seems to be basic irrespective of what else a Ph.D. recipient knows and is able to do. Organizations such as NAST, departments of theatre, and individual professors may have simpler or more detailed formulations of these capabilities.

Institutions offering and/or hiring Ph.D.s have specific definitions of what is necessary in addition to basic mastery of a field and being able to conduct research in that field. These grow from questions such as:

- What additional information or experiences should a Ph.D. have that would be useful or helpful in pursuing a career?
- What is the current market? What alternative careers may a Ph.D. be able to pursue beyond teaching at a college or university?

These questions, in turn, lead to issues of preparation for teaching in the field of specialization, or more broadly, in the field of theatre; the ability to direct or otherwise engage in performance; and questions regarding pursuit of one or more secondary fields that can make the student more marketable, particularly in academe. Beyond fundamentals essential to the purpose and nature of the Ph.D., the answers to these issues must be determined by each institution.

A number of other issues are influencing discussions and decisions about content. Among them are:

- Knowledge is expanding more rapidly than ever before, but time is not.
- The evolution of humanities scholarship produces changes in the definitions of disciplines and, at times, blurs disciplinary boundaries.
- The market for intellectually trained workers is changing. Even within academe, there are more philosophies, approaches, and delivery systems for education than ever before.
- Technology is playing a major role in changing definitions of and orientations to content. The impact of technology is a great unknown. Its impact on research content, process, and dissemination are yet to become clear. However, it is clear that many new things and ways of working will either expand the number of tools available or diminish the importance of older ways.
- Beyond technology, there are its applications in performance, scholarship, teaching, and dissemination. Each of these areas, in itself, is a potential hybrid field for scholarship.
- Current conditions are raising questions about different modes or models for research in the humanities. Experimentation and speculation occur around possibilities for combining modes of thought as well as subject matters in multidisciplinary approaches. Thus, modes of thought and action associated with scientific inquiry, politics, business, the social sciences, and even art join traditional humanities methodology as keys to humanities content.

IV. Relationships

In a sense, relationships are bridges between content and structure. Several relationships that seem to be influencing the future of the Ph.D. in Theatre are:

- The discipline and its subdisciplines. Under the broad rubric of theatre, how many subdisciplines are there? To what extent is theatre's identity a critical issue?
- Scholarship to performance. This relationship covers a spectrum from the role of scholarship in the preparation of performances to the ability of the scholar to lead or participate in performances.
- Scholarship to theatre departments and other educational programs. This relationship differs institution by institution.
- Scholarship to practical experience. There is significant rhetoric about "real world" circumstances. Any world in which a scholar works is real to that scholar. At the same time, there are practical professional issues that most scholars face over a lifetime of preparation and work.
- Scholarship to promotion. In what ways do expectations change as a Ph.D. recipient ascends the tenure and promotion ladder? What are relationships between requirements for gaining the Ph.D. and the ability to be successful in a chosen profession?
- Sources of scholarly material to theatre identity. The content addressed by theatre scholars comes from many sources: languages and literatures, history, psychology, sociology, comparative literature, and targeted studies programs of all kinds.
- Theatre to the other arts. Forces here include growing momentum from multidisciplinary work, concerns about loss of disciplinary identity and scholarly focus, technological capacities to range more freely over vast bodies of material, and a rewards system that encourages the creation of theories as a means of studying culture.
- Ph.D. to work outside academe. What would happen to the Ph.D. if a significant number of recipients became researchers in non-profit or government fields, researchers in the private sector, consultants or other independent contractors, teachers outside academe, managers in a non-profit or government field, managers in the private sector, etc.?

V. Structures

Beyond basic requirements, Ph.D. programs exhibit a variety of structures and organizational approaches. A number of important issues are:

- Program size. Considerations include resources, qualifications of applicants, and the status of the job market.
- Variations in academic cultures. These variations influence conditions under which individuals obtain the Ph.D., as well as the contexts in which Ph.D.s work.

- Regional and cultural differences. Institutions exhibit varying sets of missions and goals influenced in part by relationships to their region or their primary constituencies and their cultures.
- The orientations, uses, and capabilities associated with the Master of Fine Arts degree on the one hand, and the Doctor of Philosophy degree on the other.
- The profound influence of particular research models. Many cultural, educational, and political forces are producing questions about the extent to which scholars can demonstrate competence through projects other than the traditional dissertation. Significant discussions are underway about definitions of scholarship. These are producing rhetoric such as the scholarship of teaching, the scholarship of service, and so forth.
- The apprentice model is a standard and continuing feature of education for the Ph.D. This produces structural conditions of individualized control and responsibility more than the corporate control and responsibility associated with undergraduate education. However, this apprenticeship model grows naturally from an emphasis on specialization. The futures of specialization, therefore, will influence the futures of the apprentice model.
- Outside models. Issues such as time to degree, preparation for work, and overall cost considerations produce questions about the feasibility of structures used by other scholarly and research fields. Post-doctoral programs, internships, and shorter time-to-degree expectations are possible considerations.

VI. Preparation for Teaching

Even though possibilities for expanding the number of places where Ph.D.s in Theatre might work, it is still assumed that a majority of individuals gaining the Ph.D. will seek employment as teachers at the college level. Many pressures in higher education have created heightened concerns about the quality of teaching. This, in turn, has raised questions about the extent to which doctoral programs should formally prepare students to be teachers, and by extension, to fulfill other roles expected of faculty. Some of the issues are:

- The extent to which teaching skills and/or competence should be integral to Ph.D. requirements. Issues here include time, resources, image, and content.
- The efficacy of teaching fellowships, teacher assistantships, and similar practice-oriented programs. Concerns are expressed that many students are given only the barest orientation before being made responsible for teaching undergraduates.
- Undergraduate teaching has become a political issue. Boards of regents, legislatures, and other groups external to the university are increasingly demanding accountability.
- The relationship of teaching to the academic rewards system. Traditionally, teaching has counted far less than scholarship in the hiring, promotion, and tenure criteria of many institutions. To the extent these conditions persist, rhetoric about the importance of teaching is discounted.

- Market issues and disciplinary content. Many entry-level teaching positions in theatre indicate the necessity of being able to teach in more than one area of theatre. Combinations are not standard. Questions abound here regarding the impact of this phenomenon on the relationship between breadth and depth in graduate programs.
- Market issues as demographics. The relationship of the number of entry-level teaching positions to the number of Ph.D. graduates is unknown. Evidence available indicates that there are more graduates than jobs.
- Lack of data. The field does not have in-depth studies exploring the extent to which there are commonalities among institutions hiring Ph.D.s with respect to the competencies they are seeking.

VII. Possibilities and Challenges

Discussions thus far have revealed the number of possibilities and challenges beyond those already mentioned in previous sections: financial support for students; financial support linked to many other aspects of doctoral education in theatre. A theoretical question arises about issues of greater investment in a smaller number of students. Financial issues are also paramount in addressing expansions of competence beyond scholarship.

- Mentoring. Ph.D. students are traditionally mentored in the development of their scholarly capabilities. To what extent should mentoring be expanded to address other areas of professional competence?
- Cloning. Observations are made regularly about students becoming clones of their dissertation director. Critics see this particularly problematical because it is not likely that any given Ph.D. graduate will work in an institution that grants the Ph.D. in Theatre.
- Changes in educational delivery systems. The impact of projected scheduling patterns that would produce true year-round universities, distance learning, statutory limitations on credit hours and times to degrees, and so forth.
- Explicit preparation for the professional world. The extent to which Ph.D. programs should or can undertake this responsibility comprehensively. If this direction is pursued, it may mean new relationships with other departments and areas of expertise. It may mean accepting work in other areas not at the doctoral level.
- The Ph.D. as a certification of intellectual skill. The Ph.D. is most often identified for its high level of special preparation. To the extent that Ph.D.s begin to work broadly beyond academe, the Ph.D. may become increasingly identified with the development of high-level intellectual skills such as the ability to process data, integrate, synthesize, compile to purpose, and so forth.
- Managing multidisciplinary. To the extent that doctoral programs are involved with multidiscipline relationships, time and intellectual energy must be expended to manage relationships and ensure quality.

- The status of the profession. The Ph.D. in Theatre is not rated by the NRC. There are feelings that this symbolizes a lack of respect for the doctorate in theatre. The field needs to look at status issues carefully and move together to make improvements.
- Answering big questions. For example, what do research and/or scholarship in theatre mean now? What might they mean five years from now, ten years from now? Another example, how can NAST—working alone and with other organizations—best help the field as a whole and Ph.D.-degree-granting institutions in particular think through these and other important issues and make the best decisions?

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