

Transcription for Episode 6: The Challenges of Specialization with Jim Seitz

Run Time: 10:11

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JS: Jim Seitz (guest)

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AH: You're listening to This Rhetorical Life, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

Cue music: "One Word Extinguisher" by Prefuse 73.

AH: This week's episode addresses the challenges of specialization for students applying to graduate programs. I'm your host, Allison Hitt.

As undergraduates, students are often unaware of the specializations available to them with their majors and future graduate careers. In an effort to help students negotiate these challenges, Theresa Keicher—a PhD student in the Composition & Cultural Rhetoric program here at SU—spoke with Jim Seitz, Associate Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh. We asked if he could share some of the productive ways that students could start thinking about specializations within Composition and Rhetoric.

TK: So Jim I guess the first question I have is, I'm interested in what you might see as productive ways to disseminate complex histories about composition and English to students in their undergrad careers earlier on so they're maybe not as confused or frustrated when they move on and start to see how specialization changes their expectations for graduate school.

JS: So my sense this is that English departments and the faculty in English departments have to take more responsibility for this than they have. I really think that a lot of programs are set up so that it's just kind of a big coagulation of courses, and students go from one course to the next. But what those courses represent in the field—or their positioning—is not as clear, and the relationship between things like composition and literature and creative writing aren't articulated.

Now Gerald Graff is somebody who's been talking about this for quite a long time, and what he's been wanting people to think about is how we articulate the place of the course in a curriculum and its relationship to other courses, so that it's not just that cafeteria-food menu where there's this, this, this, this, and this, and students are kind of left on their own to figure out what the big picture is. We need to take more responsibility for articulating that big picture, and I think there's a couple of ways that we can do that. One is that—and you'll see this

happening in certain English majors around the country or English departments—they're setting up multiple paths through the English major and they're articulating what those are. So you can do, at Pitt where I teach, you can do an English major like through creative writing, and you have options there of non-fiction, fiction, poetry, and so on and so forth. You can do an English literature major. You can do an English literature major with a professional writing certificate. I've just recently finished designing with a committee a new major in composition and rhetoric. It's an English major, but the path through it would not be in literature. We have a film studies major, as well.

All of these are within English, and part of what you're doing there is saying to students, "Okay English isn't just this one vapory thing where you kind of move through the clouds." There are actually tracks or ways that you can go through a major where you may share some introductory courses together, but then you specialize—similar to the way that you would in graduate school. One of the reasons we wanted to launch a comp/English major was so that students who went on to do composition in graduate school will have already seen that there's this thing called composition that goes beyond that freshman course. You can do a whole major in it in your English department. One of the ways then would be to articulate these various paths through English. And then another way would be for teachers themselves in their classes to make it more clear—both on the syllabus and the course description and the way they talk with students throughout the semester—to keep positioning the class in relation to other classes, to talk about things that are beyond the walls of your classroom by making reference to other courses so that students can see that there's a place where this is coming from, and it's not just a vacuum.

TK: Yeah, I think both of those options would be really useful and helpful for students to know what path is open to them and also how to navigate it if they wanted to and maybe even try different courses in different tracks, but they'd at least know where they're going. I think that would be really useful, really useful.

The next question I'm interested to hear what you're interested to say has to do with the specialization within English departments and the specialization of English departments across the country. There's a seeming disconnect of curricular objectives and interests between these English departments in the country. How do you see this posing intellectual, maybe even emotional, challenges to prospective graduate students of English and Composition Studies?

JS: I guess I could just say yes, it poses problems. I think it's a difficult thing for students to navigate, and one of the things that I do find with senior English majors who come to me to talk about that they want to apply for graduate school, but they're not quite sure what that means. And they'll come in and be like, *Well, I know I want to go into grad school. Where do I apply? And how do I figure out what a good place to apply would be?* And I then have to start going through a series of questions with them—that I think for the first time—they start thinking

about specialization. Because to them, as long as English has just been this big group of lit courses, they're sort of like, *Okay, I like literature, and it's been interesting doing this, and I've started to learn how to read some criticism and write about that, and maybe I want to go on to be a professor...* but they don't have a sense of the specialization part. So when I say, "Well what *in particular* do you maybe want to pursue in grad school?" oftentimes they won't have an answer yet to that question. They'll be like, *Well, I don't know, I figured I'd read some more literature.* [laughs]

TK: Yeah, right, right.

JS: You're like, *Well, you're going to have to come up with something more specific than that.* So oftentimes one of the ways that we begin to move in that direction is by my asking them, "Well what courses did you take here that really got you engaged? Which papers are you proud of having written, and could you imagine writing some more papers about *that* particular thing?" And then if they say something like, *Well I had this women's studies course or I had this course in African American literature,* or whatever the case may be, then we can start moving in a direction of, "Well can you imagine potentially specializing in that? You don't have to declare that now, but you'll have to give a committee a sense of what your interests are." I think it's just really crucial that a student, if the curriculum itself hasn't shown—as your prior question was about—or if it hasn't made clear the importance of needing to specialize to a certain degree, then having a talk with a faculty member who can help you begin to see that is a really important aspect. Otherwise, I think people go out and they write letters because I also see the first drafts of letters that my students write—sometimes they'll share them with me and say, *What do I need to do with this letter?* And I'll look at it and I'll be like, "Ohh, well you need to try to give them a sense of what you might be interested in studying that's more specific than just literature." [laughs]

TK: Right, yeah, I mean I read my Master's application and in retrospect it's like, "Whoa, you're so broad." And when the Master's students come into English lit, they're like, "Oh I have to pick early American or Victorian?" So you see this struggle of like, "Oh I have to choose." It's so interesting that during undergrad, you're just not even aware of it, but I think that just goes to what you were saying with the first question—trying to get that information about specialization to them. I think that conversation would be particularly worthwhile to have, particularly when you're in undergrad and starting to do that.

JS: And I think also that if you mention—it's not like a prospective grad student has to mention just *one* interest, you know like, *Okay I'm going to come do Women's Studies* or something. I think mentioning two or three, which is what I advise my students to do, because if you cast yourself too narrowly, that's a problem just as much as casting your net too broadly. So if you mention more than one interest, it's a way of giving the faculty a sense that, "Okay, this person took some courses that gave them two or three avenues that they can imagine pursuing in grad

school,” and it just sort of shows a lively mind at work there that has thought beyond just the *well-I-like-literature-in-general* thing.

TK: Yeah, this has been so helpful, and I’m sure whoever listens to this will really appreciate your advice because as you know, it’s always terrifying—the process—so I really appreciate it.

JS: Great, thank you.

AH: You just listened to “The Challenges of Specialization” with special guest Jim Seitz.

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BK: This Rhetorical Life is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Program at Syracuse University. Executive Producers of this Rhetorical Life are Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt with additional production and editing from Karriann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Seth Davis.

