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Title

Introduction: Teaching and Research in Twenty-first-century Higher Education

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Journal

New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession, 5(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2024

DOI

10.5070/NC35064168

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Peer reviewed



PEDAGOGY & PROFESSION

NEW CHAUCER STUDIES

Volume 05 | 2024

Introduction: Teaching and Research in Twenty-first-century Higher Education

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Little. 2024. Introduction: Teaching and Research in Twenty-first Century Higher Education. *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* 5: 1–9.

https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/ | ISSN: 2766-1768.

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Introduction: Teaching and Research in Twenty-first-century Higher Education

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Abstract

This issue includes two special clusters: “Teaching v. Research,” edited by Katie Little, and “The Time of Psychoanalysis,” edited by Ruth Evans and R. D. Perry. It also includes three essays on teaching and contributions to three of our columns: “How I Teach,” “Conversations,” and “Histories.”

“My research informs my teaching [in some specific way]”: such was the advice for writing a transitional sentence, given to job seekers in the Fall of 1998 in the English Ph.D. program at Duke University. This sentence was intended to link our research—the paragraph describing the dissertation—and our teaching in the job letters we were writing.

American readers, and likely others, will be familiar with the template of the job letter: an opening paragraph stating the job to be applied for, one paragraph on research (the dissertation or book project), one paragraph on teaching, one paragraph on the future project, and a closing paragraph with contact information and thanks. Of course, there are slight variations. More advanced professors will expand the research paragraphs and add a paragraph on service. Applicants for teaching positions will emphasize teaching by expanding and reordering the paragraphs. There is, nevertheless, a building-block structure across the variations. Indeed, the building-block-structure should suggest the challenge of writing such letters: creating smooth transitions. How does the letter writer stitch these disparate parts together? How does she suggest that their relationship is natural, especially when the established order can seem disordered, especially in the standard version, when teaching interrupts research?

The structure revealed by the job letter reflects, of course, the widely recognized components of our profession.¹ In the journal *Profession*, published by the Modern Language Association, Sidonie Smith (2016) describes the fundamental “triad” of teaching, research, and service, emphasizing that these are a “mantra.” The three-part requirement of research, teaching, and service is not only how our jobs are formally defined through contracts and job descriptions, but also a mode of professional self-construction throughout our careers: we use these categories to write about ourselves in job letters, reports for annual performance reviews, documents produced for tenure, reappointment, promotion, and post-tenure reviews. Even as the formality of contracts and documents suggest that these categories are objective and clearly defined, the experience of many faculty members reveals a fluidity and murkiness or what Smith (2016) calls “category confusion.” For example, does an essay published in this journal, which is both peer-reviewed and dedicated to teaching, belong to teaching or to research? As importantly, the very existence of distinct categories creates tension between them (Cassuto 2016; Ryan 2016; Shumway 2016; Smith 2016). This tension could appear in the lives of faculty members: early-career tenure-track faculty might feel torn, given the advice to “publish or perish,” while at the same time faced with the needs of their students. Or the tension could appear at the institutional level, when certain activities are deemed more valuable than others by personnel committees and higher administration.

The most obvious variation and source of tension between and across institutions is the relationship between the two parts of research and teaching; hence the title of our themed cluster, “Research v. Teaching.” While the profession is, on its face, committed to the idea that these domains exist in a harmonious relationship, with research contributing to teaching, the reality is that their opposition is also fundamental to higher education. That is, the logic that undergirds this relationship is that less teaching correlates with more research and vice versa. This logic is apparent in the clear hierarchy of teaching loads at American institutions and in the Carnegie classifications themselves.

¹ I should say here that this introduction and much of this issue focuses on the American situation. Not for want of trying! Although I invited contributors from the U.K. and Europe, they were, unfortunately, unable to participate.

Carnegie classifications, for non-American readers, are “the leading framework for recognizing and describing institutional diversity in U.S. higher education” (American Council on Education 2024). Institutions are categorized primarily according to “research activity,” such as the number of doctoral programs (American Council on Education 2024). Faculty at R1 institutions (the most doctoral programs; hence the most research-oriented) and the more selective Baccalaureate Colleges tend to teach only two courses per semester or quarter, whereas faculty at R2 and less selective colleges teach three or four courses per semester or quarter. Implicit in this hierarchy is that the faculty at R1 are expected to research more, and, therefore, they teach less. The same logic holds within institutions: faculty can apply for or receive course releases to preserve their research component, especially when they increase their service load by serving as chair or head of a department, for example. Course releases are thus thought to contribute to research and service, but this redistribution of work only goes one direction: no one receives a research (or service) release in order to teach more or better. While such logic is taken for granted, there is little evidence that less teaching correlates with more research (McGreevy 2019). Indeed, my sense (confirmed by my co-editors), after 25 years in this profession, teaching at a Baccalaureate College, then R1, and now R2, is that the relationship between teaching load and research productivity is largely random, or at least it is so for faculty in English departments. Plenty of faculty at R1 institutions publish relatively little, particularly after they receive tenure, and plenty of faculty at R2 institutions research more than faculty at R1 institutions. Even within institutions, the course releases intended to support faculty research do not necessarily produce research publications.

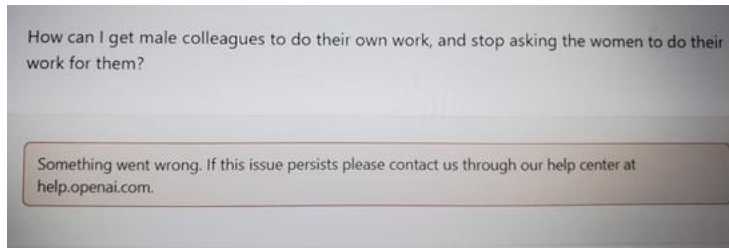
It is worth stating the obvious: the relationship between research and teaching has been shaped by the higher value assigned to research as the modern university emerged (Cassuto 2016; Shumway 2016). This higher value seemed to make sense, at least to me, back in the heyday of the star system, when *The New York Times Magazine* ran an article about Stanley Fish (Begley 1992). Although Fish was a stellar teacher, both in class and one-on-one—he once went over my prose with me, reading my sentences aloud and pausing to evaluate which were good and, more painfully and helpfully, those that were not so good—his reputation, the high regard, came not from his teaching, but from his research. Valuing research over teaching makes less sense to me now, when English professors and their projects no longer appear in newspapers, when the titles of the panels at the annual conference of the Modern Language Association, such as “Deciphering Victorian Underwear,” are no longer held up for mockery in the pages of the *New York Times* (Matthews 1991). The material reality is that the continued existence of the profession is dependent on the undergraduate students we teach. Indeed, at my institution, University of Colorado Boulder, undergraduate tuition is the largest single source of revenue (Budget and Fiscal Planning 2023–24), and in this reliance, we are not alone. Many institutions are dependent on tuition revenue (Weinstein 2023). To value research over teaching in such a context strikes me as particularly short-sighted.

In addition to the material logic, the higher value assigned to research, there are also more complicated and often emotional logics at work, and I will single out the one that is implicit in my anecdote about Stanley Fish—that research is public and teaching is private (discussed also in Hurley 2022). I know my colleagues by their research, but not by their teaching, and this absence never struck me as particularly odd. That is, until one of my colleagues, Mary Klages, and I were talking about teaching a few years ago, remarking that we have very little idea of what goes on in each other’s

classrooms and that some faculty seem to want to keep it that way. Even when we do classroom observations, we often do so only with evaluation hanging over our heads—the teaching letters required for reappointment, tenure, promotion, and post-tenure review. After Mary mentioned this private aspect, my mind pursued all the implications. As private, teaching is potentially shameful, the site where we make mistakes or people don't like us or where we fail to inspire. I can't see the reader of my books and articles, as they nod in agreement, zone out, or make a face, but I can certainly see my students as they respond to what I say.

As a result, what is often described as objective and formalized (expectations for research and teaching, the balance between them) is also emotional. Faculty themselves feel very personally about their teaching loads, when they compare themselves to their colleagues at other institutions. They also compare themselves within institutions: who is a hotshot or star (always about research) or just a good worker (typically about teaching) or is not good enough (usually research) or is not doing enough (usually teaching and service). They also feel very personally about the course assignments they receive; perhaps they even feel themselves to be slighted if they do not get to teach graduate students or upper division electives, both of which are seen as more related to research. When I was in graduate school in the 1990s, a common complaint among the graduate students was that faculty only taught seminars based on their research instead of what would be most useful to us, the graduate students, in preparing for our future jobs. I smile in disbelief when I remember this complaint, because my graduate seminars are geared as introductions. I can no longer rely upon students having any interest in the Middle Ages or, relatedly, in my research. At Duke in the 1990s, in contrast, professors of medieval literature could expect to teach a number of graduate students who were actually intending to pursue that field.

Although the basic requirement of research and teaching for the tenure-stream faculty has been fairly constant during my time in the profession, there are fewer and fewer tenure-stream faculty to which this dual requirement applies, given both adjunctification and the shrinking of the faculty (Bérubé and Ruth 2015; Colby 2023). To what extent are these new pressures ripping the stitches apart? What is the relationship between research and teaching without a star system? Without tenure? With declining enrollments? In the “University as a corporation” (Readings 1996, 11)? Hence this cluster of essays dedicated to “Research v. Teaching.” The research-teaching-service-triad's third part—service—is, I realize, notably absent. I initially saw service as connected to either research or teaching: editing journals, serving on job committees, curriculum reform, and so on. As I started receiving the essays for this issue, I decided that I was mistaken in not including it. The meaning of service and the kinds of service have changed in the increasingly corporate university. I will touch on two important changes briefly in hopes that someone will address them (and others) in another issue. First, there is too much service, as in committee work, and there are not enough people to do it. The burden seems to fall unequally on women and faculty of color (Smith 2016). In fact, one of my friends, an associate chair in another discipline at a university that will remain unnamed, was so frustrated that she asked ChatGPT about how to fix the problem. It could not answer:



(photo courtesy of Katie Little and anonymous)

Second, there are now many more administrative positions in the university than there used to be, and these positions are more highly paid than the average faculty position (Weinstein 2023; Zahneis 2023).² Indeed, given the shrinking of tenured faculty positions, administration may be the only part of higher education where there are well-compensated job openings.

The growth of administrative positions has changed the profession, although the changes are hard to quantify and difficult to discuss, even emotionally fraught. I often feel more like an employee, with assigned tasks and a boss, than an expert on medieval literature who helps determine the shape of students' education. To borrow a question from Bill Readings (1996): "how [does one] think in an institution whose development tends to make Thought more and more difficult, less and less necessary?" (175). So, it is worth wondering more openly about why, given that Readings described a shift by which "a general principle of administration replaces the dialectic of teaching and research" more than 25 years ago, there's still so little discussion among the faculty of the effects of this shift (125). Discussions of "administrative bloat" can be found in the popular press but, as far as I can tell, not so much on the agendas of department meetings (Weinstein 2023). Indeed, when I began teaching, faculty regularly criticized the administration, as bean-counting and bureaucracy, along the same lines as Readings, and now, it seems, faculty want to be the administration. There are financial incentives, of course. As mentioned above, the salaries for administrators are higher than for regular faculty. But do faculty agree that administration is more valuable than research and teaching? Perhaps I am the only one who is troubled by this re-valuing, who thinks that the proper goal of faculty should be research and teaching, that administration is merely a necessary add-on, because "every cook can govern" (James 2010 [1956]).

As these questions, and the "versus" of my title, indicate, I originally thought that the essays submitted to the cluster would emphasize the tensions and contradictions that faculty find as they negotiate their daily activities within the larger structures that define them, both the specific institutions of higher education and the more abstract institution that is the profession. After all, our journal emerged as a kind of response to "Research v. Teaching," because we, the co-editors, thought that the research-focus of existing journals left too many aspects of our profession, especially around teaching, unexamined, undiscussed, and potentially even silenced. We were well aware that research essays focus on a text as an object of study, as if it exists independently of our efforts to teach it, in

² I have used the searchable databases for salaries at The Chronicle of Higher Education: the average salary for "noninstructional staff" in management was \$119,477 and the average salary for faculty (at all levels) was \$95,936 for faculty at all levels (O'Leary 2024; Chronicle 2024).

conversation with other scholars, not students. Essays on teaching medieval texts are not thought to be contributions to scholarship on that text but, rather, to scholarship on pedagogy or education. While the tensions between research and teaching certainly appear in the conversations that we have with each other, they, somewhat surprisingly, make only a small appearance in the essays we received (hence this introduction dedicated to tensions). As one of my co-editors, Lisa Lampert-Weissig, asked, is this because no one wants to complain? Or is it more that we are not trained to think this way, i.e. structurally, about our own profession? Or, perhaps, there are different generational perspectives in play. I entered the profession at what appears now to be the end of the glory days and have become more and more aware of the “ruins” that Readings describes.

Whatever the cause, the delightful contributions that follow underline the resourcefulness and creativity of medievalists; they are a celebration of what’s interesting about medieval literature within, around, and even in opposition to the larger demands and structures of the profession, a linking of research and teaching that answers the “versus” of my title. For each of our contributors, teaching involves what we might call, following Zachary Hines’s formulation, a local consciousness: teaching particular students, with their own backgrounds, skills, and interests, who are drawn more to certain topics and assignments than to others, and at particular institutions with their own histories, cultures, and regions. In thinking through how to bring medieval studies (research) alive for undergraduates (teaching), the contributors in the “Research v. Teaching” cluster have provided many helpful resources: how to engage STEM-oriented students with problem sets (Arthur Bahr) or attract students into the humanities with different kinds of medievalisms (Andreea Boboc, Kathleen Forni, Leah Haught) and with close attention to books and editions (Megan Cook, Zachary Hines). As these essays demonstrate, this local consciousness ends up shaping research, whether intentionally or unintentionally, as how we make sense of the medieval percolates back into our thinking about our audiences and why we do what we do. From this perspective, we are all engaged in a form of medievalism, which is here a thoughtful mode of recognition: our encounter with medieval texts and ideas as mediated through our and our students’ needs and desires. In this version of medievalism, I’m inspired by Leah Haught, whose essay made me re-examine my own understanding of, and bias against, medievalism. At the same time, the essays encourage us to think about the differences across regions and institutions: Jennifer Jahner (2024) notes that the old model for higher education, in which students devote themselves solely to their studies, is now rare, and faculty must increasingly take into account those students who “are balancing multiple jobs and care responsibilities.”

If the local is where we can embrace the felicities of a teaching that feeds research, it is also, unfortunately, where we can perceive the declining value of humanities research. I am referring not only to the decreased funding for such research, but also, and more importantly, to the shrinking of tenure-stream faculty. Full-time faculty positions in English Departments (and elsewhere) are not being filled with tenure-track faculty but with full-time non-tenure-track instructors, as described by Frank Grady in his essay in this issue, reflecting on his time as Dean at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. What this means is that research is no longer deemed necessary for faculty teaching undergraduates, even at an R1 institution. To be sure, many have noted the increase in contingent and non-tenure track faculty, but some of the justification for their hiring, false as it may have been, was that they were temporary and/ or supplemental, filling in the gaps as opposed to providing the permanent face of a department. During the pandemic, this standard, in which it is tenured faculty

who define a department, shifted officially and somewhat alarmingly at least at my institution: full-time non-tenure track instructors will now, and into the future, replace tenured faculty (Flaherty 2020). If this trend spreads and continues, research in the humanities will be largely uncompensated and thus disincentivized. That is, instructors and contingent faculty do research (and most have Ph. D.'s), but because research is not part of their official contract, it is not compensated. Our profession is shifting to a model where research is unofficially mandatory (to get the job in the first place) and officially voluntary and superfluous.

The relationship between research and teaching, both now and into the future, also informs our special guest cluster: research might be a place that we pretend to be objective, whereas teaching is a place where we can engage wholeheartedly with emotion, both ours and our students'. For that reason, teaching is a fruitful place to think about psychoanalytic criticism as the cluster, "The Time of Psychoanalysis," edited by Ruth Evans and R. D. Perry demonstrates. Their introduction helpfully summarizes where we are now, the place of psychoanalytic criticism in medieval studies, and suggests how to bring this scholarship into the classroom. The essays by Patty Ingham, Wan-Chuan Kao, Paul Megna, and Jessica Rosenfeld, with an Afterword by Rita Copeland, explore the sophisticated terminology provided by psychoanalytic criticism, such as *après-coup*, putting it into conversation with medieval texts, so that students can discuss more precisely how they feel about themselves and the world around them; how a medieval text both reflects and generates those feelings.

As the special cluster makes clear, how best to introduce students to medieval texts is a common concern for almost all medievalists. Each of the three essays in our Articles section offers a distinct guide to making medieval literature more accessible. Daniel Sawyer describes how he put together his edition of Middle English poetry, thinking through what kinds of knowledge and skills students in the U.K. bring with them to the undergraduate classroom. Juliana Chapman also draws on student knowledge, that is, students' familiarity with music, to guide students through Chaucer's poetry using sound studies. Finally, Jennifer Alberghini shows how Chaucer can speak to the goals of the composition classroom, helping students make use of primary and secondary sources without anxiety.

Of course, medieval texts are not easily accessible, and both of our regular columns take up the challenges. The first, "How I Teach" by Michael Calabrese reflects on teaching the shorter (A-version) of William Langland's *Piers Plowman* in translation. Those interested in helpful tips on teaching this difficult poem should also look at the special cluster on pedagogy, appearing soon in the *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 38 (2024) that Calabrese has edited with Liz Schirmer. The second, "Conversations," responds to the theme—"Retellings of Medieval Literature in the Classroom"—in the previous issue, *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* Volume 4, Issue 2, edited by Eva von Contzen and Philomena Wolf. This column is a true conversation, an interview Candace Barrington did with Patience Agbabi. Agbabi (2014) gives a lively and moving account of her relationship to Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, an account that we hope inspires students to make these medieval poems their own.

In the end the strongest link between research and teaching, and indeed between all aspects of our job, is the simple fact that we do them; research and teaching find, therefore, their relationship in the daily tasks that we perform and in our sense of ourselves as we perform them. The everyday-ness of our tasks may at times obscure the larger structures that both make them possible and at times impossible: the institutions of higher education. These are not the same institutions they once were.

While teaching is still the bedrock of our profession, it is not highly valued (e.g. the salaries for instructors and teaching professors are lower than for tenured faculty), and research seems no longer able to provide that extra value. Now might be the time to think carefully about how we can ensure the survival of our field, both in research and in teaching.

I would like to thank my co-editors, Candace Barrington, Lisa Lampert-Weissig, and Eva von Contzen for discussing the topics covered in this introduction and for specific feedback on the introduction itself. Our conversations keep me going! I also want to thank Frank Grady, for a thought-provoking e-mail exchange about the star-system and administration and for helpful comments on the introduction.

Thanks also to Lara Armbruster and Carlotta Wolfram, our interns, for all of their work on this issue!

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