

# Redefining “Work”: English Studies, Teaching, and the Shifting Canadian Postsecondary Landscape

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**W**HAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?” That seemingly innocuous question is my departure point for exploring the challenges emanating from the changing nature of Canadian postsecondary education and the concomitant emergence of teaching-oriented positions in universities. When people ask what I’m “working on,” the question inadvertently underscores what commonly counts as academic labour. Said differently, the question “What are you working on?” highlights the privileged role universities have ascribed to themselves as the primary site of knowledge production, of research. This once unchallenged role has been eroded as teaching-focused colleges and vocationally-oriented institutes of technology, once barred or at least discouraged from undertaking research, now boast growing research agendas, usually called “applied research” to differentiate it from the “pure research” of universities, as they offer degree programming in their respective domains. I want to contend that the emergence of a spectrum of Canadian postsecondary institutions with a variety of work options is nothing to fear, although adopting this stance means confronting long-held ideological beliefs about the relative importance of research and teaching that have attended Canadian higher education since the 1950s.

From a structural perspective, the blurred lines between teaching-focused institutions engaged in applied research and research-orientated universities who also teach are the product of changing federal and provincial government policies that have shifted the certainties which have structured Canadian postsecondary education since the postwar period. Then, buoyed by federal government funding for research and the need to confront the imminent arrival of the postwar baby boomers, Canadian university officials marked out their territory in higher education and left the rest of the terrain for *les autres*, the soon-to-be established community colleges, vocational schools, and technical institutes which came to populate the postsecondary terrain in the 1960s and 70s.<sup>1</sup> Created by the provinces to further their own economic and political needs, the community colleges were differentiated both by their teaching/training focus, and, where transfer systems existed, by their subordinate status to universities. Unlike our American counterparts where institutions of higher education ranged from comprehensive research universities to four-year liberal arts colleges to two-year community colleges, the Canadian postsecondary landscape is notable for its organization of higher education into a hierarchy of colleges and universities. This arrangement is especially obvious in Ontario but evident even in Alberta, which arguably has the most diverse array of postsecondary institutions in Canada. The entrenchment of this arrangement has many features, but for my purposes, I will reductively describe the scheme as follows:

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	Universities (Education)	Colleges (Training)
Role	Knowledge Production Theory	Knowledge Transmission Practice
Work	Research	Teaching
Audience	Peers/Colleagues	Students

<sup>1</sup> The imminent arrival of the postwar babyboom young adults led to a crucial conference organized by Universities Canada's early predecessor, the National Conference of Canadian Universities, entitled *Canada's Crisis in Higher Education*. See Claude Bissell's edited collection of papers given at the conference, especially his introduction to the proceedings (i–ix). See also John Dennison and Paul Gallagher's *Canada's Community Colleges: A Critical Analysis* for an early account of how this conference shaped community colleges across Canada.

English professors played a special role in creating these oft-unspoken or taken-for-granted differentiations: I refer to Dr Claude T. Bissell, Professor of English and President of the University of Toronto, who publicly, adamantly, and ultimately successfully lobbied the Ontario provincial government to reject transferability between the nascent Ontario colleges and the expanding universities, producing what remains in many respects what John Dennison called in 1986, “two solitudes” (12). While it may be true that neo-liberal policies have contributed to diminishing the line between liberal education and vocational training, these self-same shifts are giving rise to a new spectrum of postsecondary institutions to replace the tiers of the college/university binary where teaching sat comfortably as a necessary adjunct of research. Indeed, the federal intervention into research funding since the 1990s has intensified the rewards of research at the university while also creating new opportunities for colleges to engage in research for the first time.

If we are to adapt to this new spectrum, we need to resist the temptation to think about tiers (tears) and address the deep-seated ambivalence about the role of teaching, especially of undergraduates, in university life. Undoubtedly, despite its challenges, some university professors see undergraduate teaching as a rewarding aspect of their work. But this particular academic work seldom has the same prestige as teaching graduate students or supervising doctoral work. The everyday language around teaching underscores the point. For example, in the initial discussion about this forum’s parameters, contributors were asked to consider the *compromises* required of those employed in (undergraduate) teaching positions, as if the choice to teach was second to the choice to research. Consider, too, how often our everyday language suggests teaching is an activity from which we seek “release,” as if the undergraduate classroom—and to be clear, it is often the undergraduate classroom—were a prison from which we might be paroled to do more research. There are implications to this rhetoric: it erases or at least elides the work of community college colleagues and the swath of contingent faculty in English departments who often teach writing courses (and still manage miraculously to publish here and there). All that *teaching* bends us to the tedious, time consuming, repetitious, and seemingly endless task of marking or, for those who teach those large undergraduate classes, managing teaching assistants who release us from the *labour* of it all.

What meaningful action can ACCUTE members take to adapt to a world where teaching-centred positions will become more prevalent? First, I want to recall us to the title of this association, which nominates us all

as *teachers* of English.<sup>2</sup> I contend we must return to place teaching as central, not peripheral, to an association of teachers of English. We need to work to erase the prejudices against teaching and its *work* by resisting the temptation to insist on research as our primary labour. We have *ESC: English Studies in Canada* as a vehicle to publish members' "work," and yet it appears we do little to acknowledge or make visible the work of "teaching." ACCUTE can sponsor more sessions on teaching and writing pedagogy through an annual roundtable on English Studies and Pedagogy. We can draw research and teaching together through a focus on the growing importance of undergraduate research. We can also bring teaching and research together through a closer engagement with the scholarship of teaching and learning. Such engagements promise to open doors to our colleagues in the colleges and to those in undergraduate teaching universities.

Adapting to a spectrum of employment opportunities suggests we need to think more closely about how we prepare doctoral students for teaching. While it may be the case that some graduate programs (or more likely, universities) provide graduate students with opportunities to teach, these offer an ad hoc approach to teaching. Are there ways to equalize the focus on teaching in the graduate curriculum?

Meanwhile, we might address immediate material concerns. According to the 2011 Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) study, a central challenge teaching faculty face is the lack of value and/or respect that colleagues and the academy put on their work (Vajocki et al.). We can change this simply by resisting attempts to mark out teaching faculty with different titles and rank structures. In fact, we could talk less about "streams," which suggests two parallel immovable rivers, and more about changeable, career-responsive "work patterns." Let's even demand the conversion of long-term precarious contract positions into stable tenurable teaching positions.

We must all hear the call of our association's name, our joint purpose. Let us as Canadian College and University Teachers of English work to influence collective bargaining so that when teaching-patterned positions are created they are paid the same, have the same titles, and have the same access for promotion as traditional (research) tenured positions. Just as we have created a best practices document for contract workers, let's create a similar document for teaching-patterned positions. In short, let's work

<sup>2</sup> Although I want to note that even this nomination is problematic since "teachers of English" seldom is taken to include those who teach English as a second or other language.

to elevate the work of teaching and recall that we are, at the end, teachers of English.

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