

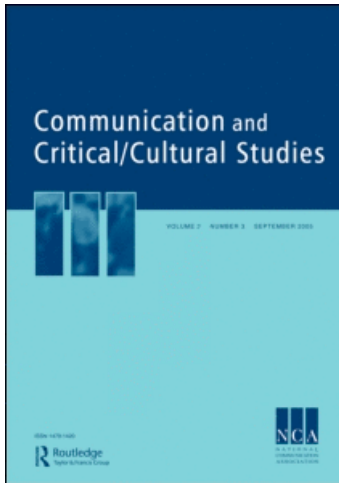
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The Pedagogy of the Job Market

Jonathan Sterne

The academic job market—which everyone I know simply shortens to “the market”—is a magic word in doctoral education. It is an occasion for consolidation of professors’ authority, a liminal space that students cross in a rite of passage as they become professors, a means of explaining or justifying choices or advice, and a strangely personified entity. The market has good and bad years. It has whims and fashions. Like the Jewish god, it is temperamental, sometimes visiting its wrath on its Job-like subjects to test their faith; and merely speaking its name can be a form of almost mystical incantation in some settings. The market is the place where doctoral students and new PhDs focus their anxieties and uncertainties. So too for graduate teachers: decisions regarding curriculum are just as often justified in terms “the market” as they are in terms of intellectual or political values.

The robustness of the concept of “the market” among critical communication scholars might be a little surprising at first blush, at least if we believe what we tell others about ourselves. In a field so attentive to language and teeming with feminists, Marxists, deconstructionists and pragmatists, one would think that talk about the academic job market would be susceptible to at least a little circumspection. Critiques of the market concept are well-known in our field. Choose one or more: the free market does not exist, the ideology of the free market limits diversity of ideas, the market concept is totalizing and conceals the plurality of economic and exchange relationships in contemporary society.

Given our readiness to analyze of the idea of “the market” whenever it is found in someone else’s text or discourse, it is worth reflecting for a moment on why critical communication scholars have not been quicker to critique the concept as it operates in our own occupational culture. One answer is that it is too close to us. The academic job market is part of the yearly cycle for graduate students and graduate teachers; it is built into the cycles that define our lives. Its omnipresence makes it close and comfortable, even when it threatens or disturbs us: “what is most obvious is most ideological.” Professors may also have their own political interests in

Jonathan Sterne teaches in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies and the History and Philosophy of Science Program at McGill University. He is author of *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Duke, 2003), and numerous articles on media, technologies and the politics of culture. His next book is tentatively entitled *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*. Correspondence to: Jonathan Sterne, Art History and Communication Studies, McGill University, 853 Sherbrooke St. W., Montreal QC, Canada H3A 2T6. E-mail: jonathan.sterne@mcgill.ca

maintaining a concept of the market for the purposes of graduate education. The fear that students feel around the job market can be used as a kind of intellectual gate, with the professor as its keeper: “don’t write your dissertation on *that* subject—you’ll never get a job!” Political economists of communication have repeatedly shown how appeals to market reasoning actually cut down the diversity of thought in the press. Why would we imagine that it works differently in our own field?

Whether in formal mentorship or in casual conversation, we too easily accept a conception of the academic job market as a big, unified, stratified thing. For many, there exists an occupational ideology that arranges jobs in a hierarchy roughly graded according to the prestige of the institution, the potential for permanent employment in the position, the teaching load, and so forth. Administrator-created institutional incentives around barometers of “placement” reproduce this thinking. We brag about *where* our graduates are working, and savvy grad school applicants will sometimes ask us to do so. Unthinking professors will sometimes consciously or unconsciously convey to their doctoral students that the best kind of job is one like their own: at a research university with a light teaching load and doctoral students of their own. And yet I have not heard of any academic study, using any known research method, that has actually shown a correlation between the prestige of the position and the happiness of its occupant. I have come to believe that the people around us (colleagues, students, staff, administrators), the level of intellectual freedom we are accorded in research and teaching, a collegial and respectful environment and non-job factors like one’s personal life and all those mysterious factors bound up in the phrase “quality of life” seem to have much more to do with overall satisfaction than the prestige of the institution or position. It is true that many of the most sought-after jobs in our field now go to truly amazing people because of the relative scarcity of jobs. It is also true that many brilliant, amazing and (more to the point) happy people occupy jobs that do not confer upon them any particular prestige. It should not matter, but many of us act as if it does.

Of course, the increasing scarcity of academic jobs does matter. Critical Communication Studies has for some time now had better ratios of applicants to positions than neighboring fields like Literature, Film, History, Philosophy, and Women’s Studies. But as the total number of permanent jobs available in any given year diminishes, and as the total number of applicants continues to increase, both doctoral students and professors find the tighter market a source of stress and anxiety. There is pressure to do something—*anything*. More than one person has asked me what they need to do in order to land an academic job now that we are in a recession. Yet the only reasonable answer is the most unsatisfying one: finish your dissertation, publish, understand how your work fits into the field, put together a strong application. It is exactly the same answer as before there was a job market crunch. Even though people are still getting jobs, it is easy to feel as though one is caught amidst factors beyond one’s own control. Students who first applied for jobs in fall of 2008 entered their doctoral programs at a time when the number of academic positions in Communication Studies was still expanding. The reality they confronted last year did not match their expectations when they entered their doctoral programs.

Since professors cannot control the conditions under which other institutions offer up academic positions, we must look for other ways to negotiate the problem of too-many-applicants-for-not-enough-jobs. The current confusion also gives us an opportunity to rethink how we talk with students about academic jobs and how we mentor them on the road to completion of the PhD. We could be more honest, more open and more frank with our students from the very beginning. It would be to their benefit, and it would cut down on some of the scaremongering about the academic job market that is trade of commercial journalism, whether the *New York Times* or the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Thus, I propose the following pedagogical principles for realigning the position of the academic job market in doctoral education:

First, never use the academic job market as a lever for professorial authority. We should not confuse intellectual and professional concerns. If professors do not like a thesis topic, they should be brave enough to give an intellectual reason, and students should be brave enough to demand one. Professors know far less about “the market” than we claim to and past experience does not in any way guarantee future truth telling.

Second, demystify the market and the job. Much of the incantational power of the market comes from lack of knowledge. So we should make knowledge available and accessible. When I landed my first tenure track job in 1999, I found lots of useful web resources but few clearinghouses for advice, so I started a web page of links to useful information so as to be able to share what I had learned (now available at <http://sternetworks.org/Academe>). That page has grown into a general storehouse of information on professionalization, and over the years I have added articles on a wide range of topics. Students need clear, honest and straightforward discussions of the various issues pertaining to academic employment from the first term of their doctoral programs. They should also organize their own panels and discussions on issues not covered by faculty-organized sessions. All these should be public, departmental events.

Third, teach interestingness: encourage curiosity and currency in your doctoral students before you encourage proper “disciplining.” Communication scholars have long complained about not being read outside our own field. While this is something of a fiction at this point, I would submit that the first step to broader interdisciplinary interest in communication scholars’ work is their own interest in the work of people in other fields. Students should not accept professors’ warnings about what is “inside” and “outside” the field. Curiosity about other fields and subjects has never hurt a scholar.

Fourth, disrupt the grand narrative: do not seek to reproduce yourself. Consider students’ long-term happiness over abstract ideals of career. Advise your students accordingly and challenge administrators when they write these narratives into the measures by which they evaluate your department. Conversely, students should not accept the grand narrative when it is given to them. It should be challenged in daily conversation as well in formal conversations about professionalization in the department or the professor’s office.

Fifth, do not pretend to be what you are not. The PhD is a professional and specialized degree. During the 1990s job crisis in English, Elaine Showalter (then

MLA president) suggested that underemployed English PhDs could seek out positions in journalism (apparently unaware that other parts of the university already were training students to be journalists). As professors we have specialized training we can convey to students, but we also must bring in other people and other resources if we want to show student alternatives to the academic career path. This should also be a task of our professional associations. Departments need to stay in touch with alumni who are not professors, not just to solicit money (as is now often the practice) but rather to use them as advisors for students, as a supplement to professors.

Sixth, be honest about the job situation with anyone who expresses interest in graduate education. Be honest with new recruits to doctoral programs about the conditions of the job market, the nature of the training and education they will receive, and the right and wrong reasons to go into university work. Tell your undergraduates as well. Make a rule that any time you agree to write letters of recommendation for applicants to graduate school, you will have a conversation about goals and expectations with the student first.

Seventh, educate yourself and others about the politics of academic labor. Make academic labor a topic of conversation in meetings and seminars (without, of course, allowing it to subsume all other intellectual issues). Scholars in English literature and composition studies have developed a robust intellectual tradition of discussing the academic job market and many inventive and controversial proposals for solving some of the more vexing problems of the academic workplace (interested readers should begin their exploration with *Workplace: A Journal of Academic Labor*). It is time for Communication Studies to have its own extended discussion around academic labor. We can begin by learning from others, keeping in mind that the specific conditions of our field do differ from those around us. Critical scholars ought to be leading the way: we often claim progressive and transformative politics as the authority upon which our scholarship is based. It would be narcissistic to turn away from the world's difficult political issues to deal solely with issues inside the academy. But what do all our political commitments mean if we do not also turn the same critical gaze back upon our own occupational environments?