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Featured PhD Student: Sarah Puett

SEPTEMBER 29, 2017

Where are you from?

St. Joseph, Missouri. Which “snail mail” fans will recognize as the birthplace of The Pony Express.

Where did you previously attend school? What was your degree in?

I have a Master’s of Applied Arts in Written Communication from Missouri Western State University.

Why did you choose Writing Studies at the University of Minnesota?

Feels like it was ages ago, but there were many reasons. The caliber of the faculty and the breadth of research interests—of both faculty and grad students at the time—was of course important. But I was also drawn to the inherent interdisciplinarity of a Rhetoric program in a Writing Studies department. I came to the field fairly indirectly (I focused on economics and technical communication in undergrad) so I still had a lot to learn when I got here, but this department kind of felt like coming home. I didn’t realize it at the time of my admission, but the blend of faculty and methods, as well as the culture of the department were perfectly suited to developing my research and pedagogical interests.

What is your research area?

I work at an intersection of literacy and rhetorical studies, typically using ethnographic methods. My dissertation focuses on critical community literacy, specifically asking how events and practices are part of activist sites and how these events shape broader collective imaginaries. I’m generally interested in how critical literacy functions in social sites; how it’s brought to bear and what it does for people, causes, communities, and movements.

What do you find most interesting about your research area?

New things every day! I am made and re-made all the time by my experiences in the field. I find the research in community literacy to be some of the most provocative yet accessible work in our field. It’s the kind of research that I can devour with the same ferocity as any beach-read, because it’s about people, and relationships, and power, and humanity. I also appreciate the very clear interests of “social change” expressed by the community literacy lot. Considering the grip of the academic echo chamber, I find this to be a powerful declaration of priority.

Would you tell us about a project or course that was particularly meaningful to your professional development?

All of my coursework was formative, both inside and outside the department. My first semester here I took two courses with my advisor, Dr. Christina Haas, who warned me about how tough that would be. Challenge accepted! One was a methods course, where we looked in (sometimes painful) detail at the rhetorical nature of methodological choices. The second was a situated literacies seminar, where we collectively examined theories of literacy and explored how literacy is bound in complex cultural, social, technological, material, and ideological ways. In both courses we went afield, working in local community environments and engaging all the research issues that arose with both a critical eye and an open mind. I don’t think it’s an overstatement to say I learned pretty much everything I know about research problems, design, and literacy that fall. It would be impossible to overstate how thankful I am for everyone involved in those courses.

What do you like to teach and why?

Composition forever! First-year writing is tremendously important to the university. To me the class is the purest, most distilled version of our field. A writing class about writing! It’s so meta it’s almost fractal. Turtles all the way down. And there are so many great ways to approach teaching it so FYW programs all look very different. I found a deep connection with the approach and values forwarded by our program. I feel very lucky to have been involved in creating our program handbook, which is used in all 150 sections of FYW each year.

Whether I’m teaching composition or technical communication I typically use a cultural studies approach, focusing on rhetorical situation, argumentation, and criticism. To me, it’s important that students have a toolbox of widely applicable processes and concepts to use as both readers and writers.

What would you like to do in the future?

I absolutely love teaching writing and I really enjoy fostering a strong teaching community. I’d like to continue doing that work, as it sustains me in fundamental ways. I’m also committed to doing local, community-engaged critical literacy research, especially given this political moment, and hope to extend our collective understanding of the dialectical between literacy and organizing efforts. I feel strongly about my own activism and I’m still figuring out how to morally and ethically engage those commitments alongside my professional goals. I imagine that will be a lifelong process. If all else fails, I want to be a flower farmer who fights for racial justice.

What are your interests / hobbies outside of academia?

I enjoy not-enjoying running (complaining about it constantly but doing it anyway). I love local art shows, live music, traveling with friends and family, and doing my part in the resistance.

What advice would you give to someone considering pursuing their PhD with Writing Studies?

Trust your interests, even if they don’t seem in vogue or at the vanguard of the field’s conversation. There will come a point when you realize you’re steering this thing. If you honor what’s at the heart of your larger personal project, teaching and research will continue to feel like a wonderful and important opportunity even through all the challenges.



PhD candidate, Sarah Puett

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