

Distant Readings of Disciplinarity: Knowing and Doing in Composition/Rhetoric Dissertations, by Benjamin Miller, Utah State University Press, 2022. 182 pp.

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It is somewhat of a routine in the field to worry about our identity and status as an academic discipline. There is no shortage of takes. Some have wondered if we can survive without a methodological center (North); others provide insightful perspective on what we're all about (Harris) and nonetheless miss the contributions of many colleagues; still others seek some terminological stability while valuing the field's multiplicities (Phelps and Ackerman). I myself have wondered whether other fields similarly struggle to summarize their collective missions or whether it's desirable, let alone possible, to distill any discipline to its core. The ubiquity of this existential quandary makes Benjamin Miller's intervention in *Distant Readings of Disciplinarity: Knowing and Doing in Composition/Rhetoric Dissertations* (2022) all the more impressive.

Taking his crack at the perennial "who we are and what we do" question, Miller establishes the important point early on that "it's not just okay to have different members of the same discipline doing different kinds of work; it's the normal, expected state of affairs" (22). In other words, there is no moment of arrival in disciplinarity. Instead, pragmatically focused on an understanding of the field via graduate training, Miller asks: how "do we talk about what's being credentialed by the PhD in composition/rhetoric?" (7). How do graduate students in rhet/comp/writing studies (RCWS)¹ work toward becoming part of this field—recently and at scale?

These questions turn Miller to a rather understudied and "core knowledge-making genre in our field" (16)—the RCWS doctoral dissertation, a virtually exhaustive set of them completed between 2001 to 2015. Allying with other recent big data and distant reading approaches (e.g., Detweiler; Gallagher et al.; Mueller; Lang and Behr; Palmeri and McCorkle; Reid), Miller undertakes "algorithmic visualization of disciplinary metadata" (8) within a corpus of about 1,900 dissertations marked in ProQuest as "language, rhetoric and composition" (30) as well as a narrower set of 1,684 dissertations completed at institutions with a RCWS program.² In all, Miller runs three major queries focused on dissertation topics and methods with "roughly 881,025 pages for [his] full corpus, and 388,884 in the sub-corpus from confirmed Rhet-Comp programs" (31). From this data, Miller generates iterative pictures of RCWS—views which help expand "our sense of what a comp/rhet degree entails" (8) and gives space to synthesize our own varied hyper-local senses of the discipline with zoomed-out, aggregate views (23).

At least two important caveats flavor Miller's turn to big-data scales. Most significant perhaps, Miller repetitiously reminds that his graphs, heat-maps, and tables are indeed inescapably maps (inherently reductive (132) and political (131), for example) but never manifestos meant to imply or enforce strict borders. He emphasizes instead that ". . . maps like those in [his] book are not intended to be drawn only once. The disciplinary terrain is in constant flux, as individuals and departments negotiate their ways through overlapping and diverging interests" (26). Second, Miller recognizes outright the limits of equating (North American) graduate program credentialing with "the field" in any definitive sense. At the least, his dissertation mapping excludes "a great many excellent and committed teachers of composition who either never wrote a dissertation or who wrote one on something other than writing, rhetoric, composition, or literacy" (132). His distant reading visualizations provide solid but never unmoving, nor unmovable, ground.

The book proceeds in three body chapters, each asking different questions of the corpus and utilizing slightly different methods. In chapter two, "So What's your Dissertation About? Subject Expertise in the Aggregate," Miller couches his distant reading in the familiar theory/practice divide. He asks: does the dissertation corpus reflect a surplus of teaching-related topics or a dearth of theory-focused projects? And more broadly, just what are dissertators in RCWS programs writing about? (29). It is with the full text of 1,684 RCWS dissertations that Miller performs perhaps the book's most complicated algorithmic and statistical queries. Using topic modeling methods and text analysis programs like MALLET (34), Miller offers multiple views and relationships among the most occurring topics in the corpus. Miller assigns labels of Disciplinary Formations; Scenes of Teaching; and Rhetorics of Power, Conflict, and Politics (37) to the top three topic categories but doesn't present them just as raw percentages. Miller also takes account, for example, of how discrete projects entail multiple topics (40) or "how widely distributed topics are *across* dissertations, regardless of where those topics rank *within* dissertations" (57)—all views which allow readers to understand what kinds of work might be possible and where one's own interests might fall. Plainly too, the chapter makes "clear that the *theory/practice balance is actually fairly even across RCWS writ large*" (74, emphasis in original).

Chapter three, "How Do You Know?: Unevenly Distributed Dappling in Dissertation Methods," asks "[w]hat methods are graduate students marshalling in the pursuit of their PhDs?" (77). This chapter covers similar, but not duplicative, ground as Miller's 2014 CCC article. Miller adapts a coding scheme of fourteen "method tags" (81-82)—the hierarchy and descriptions of which are themselves a helpful guide for graduate students orienting to methodological options in the field especially. Miller relies on human—not computer—reading at scale, "cod[ing] primarily through a close reading of

dissertation abstracts, assisted by skimming the tables of contents and chapters when readers initially disagreed” (80). Among the many insights here, we learn the frequencies which with the assigned tags appear across in the corpus, that most dissertations are multimethod (84) and that 39.4% of projects name two methods (86). Miller shows also how RCWS programs play shaping roles in methodological uptake. For example, he identifies a clear programmatic focus evident in some programs (e.g., New Mexico State shows twice as many “Clinical/Case Study” projects than “Philosophical” (88-9)), as well as significant methodological range in others, large and small (92). This chapter is full of detail for current grad student researchers, those looking for programs, as well as those faculty working in them.

The final body chapter, “But Doesn’t Everyone Know about Writing?: Distinguishing RCWS from Allied Fields” investigates dissertations from across disciplines including communication, education, philosophy, and psychology (111) which focus on writing. Running similar queries as chapter two and focused on those 695 “confirmed-non-RCWS” (110) dissertations, Miller aims to discern “what’s *distinctive* about RCWS” (112). What might make RCWS projects “recognizable as a coherent group” (112)? Insights again abound in this chapter. For instance, Miller finds more experimental, statistical, or empirical methods (116) in non-RCWS projects and, somewhat conversely, patterns which may “reflect a disciplinary culture that valorizes theory over empiricism” (118) in RCWS. (Evaluating or breaking with this tendency is something Miller advises should be weighed by RCWS “graduate faculty and students” (118)). Miller closes this chapter with an extensive set of conclusions drawn from his comparison effort. Among them, he suggests that terms or topics themselves don’t distinguish RCWS, but how they mean does. Namely, he notes differences in what is signaled by “rhetorical analysis” (128), “literacy,” (129) and “politics” (128-9), observing for the latter that distinctly “for RCWS, all writing is political, involving positionalities that emerge through the rhetorical framing of shifting and multiple selves and audiences” (128). As throughout, Miller’s interpretations of what he sees in the data are offered with both strong statistical basis and space for exceptions.

This book achieves. I felt immediate relevance toward understanding my own working life and the graduate program in which I work. Miller’s book is a must-read for courses serving as introductions to graduate study in RCWS and in research methods courses. His work is a complex undertaking performed with simplicity. Indeed, Miller is not just a savvy computer guy and statistician; he’s an elegant writer (for evidence of his prose chops, just see the book’s elegant overarching metaphor about LEGO sets—I won’t spoil it!). I admit I don’t come away knowing the nuances of the programs he’s run nor the math behind them. Said differently, this book is not a primer on how to do research like his (though I’d read it if he wrote one). While full understanding of each

visual might elude, Miller proves a sage guide, talking the reader through his findings without submitting to the allure of certainty or positivism we might at first associate with big data readings. This guiding role seems to delight him, and for that I feel grateful.

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Notes

1. After starting by naming the field composition studies, Miller settles on RCWS (9-10) for how it aligns with subject areas within MLA and the Federal Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED).

2. Miller confirms this list through affiliation with the Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition and inclusion on Rhetmap.org.

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