Peter Brooks: Connected Academics and the Ethics of Reading  
(MLA “Connected Academics” roundtable)

I propose two premises for a discussion of our subject: first brief and somewhat polemical, second even briefer, and deadly serious.

1. **Graduate and Professional Education**

   The “connection” proposed in the “Connected Academics” initiative hinges on changes in what we traditionally describe as “graduate and professional education,” the work (administrators will tell you) of “graduate and professional schools.” We think we know what a professional school does: it prepares you to become a professional, to exercise a profession: it is a high-level vocational training. Graduate education is a more slippery beast. As it has developed over the span of time since Daniel Coit Gilman more or less invented it at Johns Hopkins, it has come to be largely a professional school as well, essentially training professors for university positions. Gilman’s importation of a German model of the advanced research seminar and the doctoral thesis dedicated to an original contribution to knowledge was a necessary addition to a still somewhat parochial American university. It was a major reform that had analogues in other countries seeking to bring universities into the unbounded promise of research unfettered by dogma, offering state and society new options for thought and life. There were discontents of the PhD, and attempts to break its hegemony, notably in President Abbott Lawrence Lowell’s institution of the Society of Fellows at Harvard—attempts that never fully succeeded. The PhD rules, and so we need to ask whether its present definition and function, almost wholly linked to entry into the academic profession, can be opened up to the concerns that animate the “connected academics” movement that brings us here today.
Here, an analogy that may or may not be pertinent: the crisis in legal education. There is an overproduction of JD’s, leaving law school without the promise of employment, and with huge debt. Many law schools have reduced their admissions numbers considerably. A more radical measure, endorsed by President Obama, proposes that law school cut back from three to two years and become more resolutely vocational, producing graduates more job-ready. Since law school seems preeminently a professional school, accredited by a national bar associated that regulates the practice of law, the reform proposals make a certain kind of sense. Yet they have met with more resistance than acquiescence, because the leading law schools have always seen themselves as something more than vocational schools. They have wanted to offer training in a body of material and kind of reasoning useful in other social enterprises. Throughout American history, the lawyer has been potentially a leader of the community and a representative in various political or civic bodies, and the legal curriculum at least flirts with other subjects: philosophy, social theory, economics. The crisis of the law schools might in fact, in some instances, lead away from the vocational, to a more creative engagement of law in relation to other cultural discourses, and a broader study of the place of law in American social and psychic life.

Is there any usable analogy here to PhD programs, which long have faced a crisis of employment, but have responded mainly with paralysis? In many universities, certainly the one where I now teach, the dominant model, which dictates we should speed students to a doctorate in five years so as to get them most efficiently on to the job market, seems to have been forged in 1950s Detroit: roll them off the assembly line as fast as you can. It bears no relation whatsoever to current conditions in the profession. Graduate education has had much less sustained attention, and much less reform, than undergraduate, and it’s my impression that the “leadership” of graduate
education in Arts and Sciences has been especially resistant to intelligent innovation. One could certainly think, along the lines of changes proposed for legal education, of a graduate education that produced students more ready for the kinds of jobs they are likely to be offered.

But that’s assuming that graduate school is only a professional school tied to employment in higher education. It has been that for some time: it was that already when I was a grad student in the 1960s—I remember the sinking feeling of narrowing horizons when I moved from undergraduate to graduate student, a sense of enlistment in a profession before I was ready for that, while I still wanted to be intellectually exploratory. Graduate school often discourages exploration and experimentation—they’re inefficient, they risk wasting time—because graduate education has tied itself so closely to the production of PhD’s for positions in the university—positions that have ceased to exist, or have considerably mutated.

For me, then, what’s at stake in the questions being asked by “Connected Academics” go, or could go, to the heart of the matter. Are we content with the current definition of graduate education, or should we undertake a thorough overhaul on the premise that the production of teachers for higher education is only one of the things that graduate school is for? I trust it is clear that I am in favor of the latter alternative. Graduate education should not seek simply to reproduce professors like myself. It is hard to give up the reproduction model—it’s cozy to have students who want to do the kind of things you do. But the profession itself has changed radically in ways that we are all aware of, and which mean that even those who land a university job will most often have a very different experience of academia than my generation.

So a path to the reform of graduate education might begin by decoupling it from preparation for “the profession.” I am not against competence, scholarship,
specialization: those remain crucial. And I hope some few will continue to want to be professors. But the definition of graduate study should cease to be so rigidly subject-based as it is. I think the graduate student should be freed to undertake a very broad interdisciplinary course of study, one that provides more and richer contexts for understanding the place of any one discipline within the academy and within the world. For instance, no one, whether studying German literature or Malaysian anthropology, should be ignorant of the workings of the global economy: a course in economics should be part of everyone’s baggage. And also a course in constitutional law. And at least an acquaintanceship with computer science. And you can complete the curriculum in many ways. There is nothing wrong with training cultural generalists. I want to see our students in the liberal arts feel empowered.

2. **Empowerment provided by graduate study**

I see that empowerment coming from the student’s growing mastery of a range of discourses that constitute the realities we all have to negotiate. There in fact lies the particular strength of training in the humanities, particularly what I would call the “interpretive humanities”: those fields, including English, foreign languages and literatures, philosophy, art history, archaeology, anthropology, for instance, where we are called upon to read texts and artifacts, to interpret them to our audiences, to make them speak anew. In the classroom, we humanists are very often ventriloquists, speaking not so much in our own voices as making another voice—a voice from the past, for instance, or from another culture, or the voice implicit in a mute objet—speak through ourselves. We undertake this strange and exhilarating experience of self-alienation as we subordinate our selves to other cultural expressions. We practice Keats’s “negative capability,” submerging our own personality into that we would
bring to our students' appreciation. All great art is impersonal, said T.S. Eliot, by which he meant that it reaches beyond the individual personality. And we as teachers try to reach that ideal.

We humanists are hence better equipped than most others in the university to understand the meaning, the import, and the weight of discourses of all types, and to make our students see how learning to decode these discourses, in all their nuance, their possibly hidden intentions as well as their overt statements, gives them the power to negotiate the world. What it all comes back to is reading: reading in the sense of a close, considered, self-aware activity—what is sometimes referred to as “close reading,” or even better: “slow reading.” Reading in my sense of the term includes close attention to foreign languages as well as our own, and to significant things as well as texts. Reading as an aware activity is what we learn to do better than anyone else, and it’s what we have to offer other disciplines, and the world at large.

I have for the past few years been teaching a course I call “The Ethics of Reading.” By that I don’t intend to suggest that reading certain “great books” will make you a better, a more moral person. I don’t believe that is necessarily the case. It is rather that reading closely, attentively, with a questioning regard for uses of language and nuances of meaning is in itself an ethical enterprise. I undertook the course first in reaction to the “Torture Memos” when they began to be released by the Department of Justice a number of years ago. Those memos, composed in the Office of Legal Counsel at Justice—the very sanctum of legal interpretation—offered such abusive uses of interpretation, such twisted, distorted readings and uses of language, that anyone trained in literary interpretation just had to say: no. This won’t do. You cannot make texts (in this instance, the United States Code as incorporating the Convention Against Torture and Cruel and Inhuman Treatment) mean whatever you want them to mean, to
serve the interests of your political masters. There are interpretive moves that are not simply wrong but also unethical, and that will have horrible results in the real world. We humanists may not be in a position to stop torture from occurring, but at least we can expose the language, the very speech-acts, in which it is made to seem a legitimate tool of national policy.

What I am trying to urge, then, is the very centrality of our task to everything in the “real world.” In fact, I hate the opposition forced upon us between academia and the “real world”—what could be realer than learning to read, at all stages of that skill, from the very first apprenticeship in language to the attempt to understand the most difficult texts and ideas? Cognitive psychologists confirm our sense that without reading, in its most intensive and extensive senses, there can be no mastery of the world. And also no resistance to those who would master others through the manipulations of language and message. If I am right, it follows that it shouldn’t be impossible, it shouldn’t even be difficult to connect academics to that world outside. Each needs the other. But of course neither quite knows that. The world of cultural work and commentary outside the academy, very much including journalism about intellectual matters, often seems hostile to academics, content with a caricature of what we are like. If graduate education needs to change, so do the organizations that might be interested in smart and well-trained students.

Here, for me, lies the deep interest of the experiments that will go forward under the banner of “connected academics”: to make both the academy and other institutions of cultural commentary and transmission understand how they need one another. We need to find ways for them to read together, in a mutual exchange of understandings.