FALL 2026 · 90-MINUTE SESSION

Designing Doctoral Futures

Graduate Students as Architects of Humanities Training

Imagine three versions of doctoral education, then choose a first move you can start on.

- Brainstorm, iterate, and prototype
- Challenge limiting beliefs
- Choose one incremental change

TODAY'S PLAN

Warm-up, three odyssey plans, a group ideal, and one first move

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See the work at the reception

What you will do today

1

Brainstorm, iterate, prototype

Develop a series of odyssey plans: three versions of doctoral education.

2

Challenge limiting beliefs

Question what a doctoral program has to look like.

3

Choose one incremental change

Find a step within your own control that moves your department toward your group's vision.

Our 90 minutes

Time	Segment
0:00	Welcome and warm-up
0:12	Odyssey plans and generative feedback
0:18	Part A: your three odyssey plans
0:34	Part B: group share
0:47	Part C: our ideal doctoral education
1:02	Part D: one incremental change
1:13	Debrief and closing reflection

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WELCOME BACK

From talking about what needs to change to designing it

You just heard four perspectives on Humanities doctoral education.

WARM-UP

What can you do with a paperclip?

Three rounds, one minute each. Take a paperclip and a sheet of scratch paper.

ROUND 1 · 1 MINUTE

List as many uses for a paperclip as you can.

Write fast. Keep going until time is called.

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ROUND 2 · 1 MINUTE

Quantity, not quality.

Add as many new ideas as you can to your list.

Warm-up · Paperclip brainstorm

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ROUND 3 · 1 MINUTE

Only absurd, impractical, or bad ideas.

The worse the idea, the better. Keep writing.

Warm-up · Paperclip brainstorm

What changed when the rules changed?

Notice

How did your thinking change when the rules changed?

Name

What helped you generate more possibilities?

Letting go of the "right" answer opens up more expansive thinking: from judgment to curiosity, from quality to quantity.

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SHOW OF HANDS

Who has a Plan A for life after the PhD?

And who has a Plan B?

Contents and definitions

Odyssey plans: more than one Plan A

The usual question

“What’s the one right path?”

The odyssey question

“What are three paths that could all be great?”

Today we apply that question to doctoral education itself.

Three plans for doctoral education

Plan 1

The Blueprint

Doctoral education as I experience it today.

Plan 2

The Reinvention

What if that model weren't an option?

Plan 3

The Dreamscape

No limits on resources or expectations.

Generative feedback

We’re not judging or fixing each other’s plans. We’re helping each other see patterns and possibilities.

Listeners, do not

- Critique
- Evaluate
- Advise

Listeners, do

- Notice energy, themes, curiosity
- Reflect what you hear
- Invite more

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Sentence stems for listeners

Instead of “That doesn’t seem realistic,” try:

“I noticed you seemed really energized when you talked about…”

I noticed…	You seemed most energized when…	A theme I heard was…	Tell me more about…

The core of the session: four parts

A

Your three plans

Work alone on paper.

16 min

B

Group share

Share in groups of 3 to 4.

13 min

C

Our ideal

Build one ideal version on a large post-it.

15 min

D

One change

Identify a change you can start on.

11 min

PART A · INDIVIDUAL ODYSSEY PLANS

Three plans, one at a time

Sketch

A diagram, timeline, or list is fine.

Title

Give each plan a six-word title.

Ask

Write 1 to 2 questions you still have about each plan.

Prototypes, not commitments. About 5 to 6 minutes per plan.

PART A · PLAN 1 · ABOUT 5 TO 6 MINUTES

The Blueprint

Doctoral education as you experience it today. What is it made of, who is part of it, where does it lead?

Sketch it, give it a six-word title, and note 1 to 2 questions you still have.

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PART A · PLAN 2 · ABOUT 5 TO 6 MINUTES

The Reinvention

Suppose the current model were not an option. What takes its place?

Sketch it, give it a six-word title, and note 1 to 2 questions you still have.

PART A · PLAN 3 · ABOUT 5 TO 6 MINUTES

The Dreamscape

No limits on resources, money, or expectations. What would you build?

Sketch it, give it a six-word title, and note 1 to 2 questions you still have.

PART B · GROUP SHARE

Four-minute rounds, one presenter at a time

2 min

Presenter shares

Share the plan that felt most energizing.

2 min

Listeners give generative feedback

Use the stems. Stay centered on the presenter.

Choose a sharing order now. Groups of 4 add about 4 minutes.

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Roles in each round

Presenter

- Share the plan that felt most energizing
- Say why you chose its title
- Name one thing you noticed while making it

Personal details may stay private.

Listeners

- Offer affirmations
- Name themes and energy
- Ask “tell me more”

Do not critique, advise, rank, or fix.

Inquire, but don’t take the focus. Stay centered on the presenter.

PART C · ARTICULATE THE IDEAL

Our ideal doctoral education

Not a perfect program, and not a full design, but a clear picture of what you want doctoral education to be.

Use pieces of each person's plans. Your post-it will be on display at the reception.

PART C · ARTICULATE THE IDEAL

Three steps to your group's ideal

Step 1 · about 3 min

Name one element

Each person names the one element from their plans they most want. Look for common threads. Every person's element appears.

Step 2 · about 3 min

Use the panel as a lens

Which of the four panelist themes belong in our version?

Step 3 · about 6 min

Write it on the post-it

A six-word title, 3 to 5 features of the program, and one line on what it makes possible for students.

Build on each other's ideas with "yes, and…" before narrowing.

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PART C · STEP 2

Four panelist themes as a lens

1
Relationships and belonging

2
Breadth of pathways

3
Skills language

4
Departmental embedding

Which of these ideas belong in our version?

PART D · ONE INCREMENTAL CHANGE

From the ideal to what you can start

Features that need faculty or administration stay on your post-it as the vision.

Sort · about 2 min

Mark which features graduate students could start on now, and which need faculty or administration to move.

Choose · about 2 min

Pick one feature within your control. If it feels too big, shrink it.

Look for something small enough that you could start within a month.

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PART D · ONE INCREMENTAL CHANGE

Ask a better question, then make a first move

Ask · about 3 min

How might we…?

- Invites ideas
- Leaves room for more than one answer
- Focuses on something you can influence

First move · about 3 min

Fill in the first-move box

- What the first move is
- With whom
- By when

Whole-group debrief

What did you notice as you imagined different versions of doctoral education?

Where did curiosity or reframing show up in your thinking?

What did someone else notice that you hadn’t noticed?

What themes appeared across groups?

Each group names its first move aloud.

CLOSING REFLECTION

One possibility you're curious about

Choose a small way to explore it: a conversation, an experience, or a little research.

BEFORE YOU GO

Post your group's post-it at the reception and look at what the other groups imagined.

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Thank you!

APPENDIX · BACKUP OPENING ACTIVITY (OPTION A)

Mockups: user, need, constraint

User

Graduate students. The same for every group.

Need

Drawn from your group's Need card.

Constraint

Drawn from your group's Constraint card.

Sketch a quick mockup in about 5 minutes. Show your challenge, a brief explanation, a sketch, and an optional name.