Identity, Agency, and Precarity: Considerations of Graduate Students in Technical Communication

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Abstract. This article explores graduate students' precarity, which helps us consider issues of labor, citizenship, risk, and oppression, drawing attention to the conditions that shape our existence. We seek to open a conversation on the precarities of graduate students, and invite faculty and program administrators to join us in this conversation to act as allies in our ongoing work.

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Graduate students occupy precarious territory given their multifaceted roles as students, teachers, and scholars. The concept of precarity highlights "the affective, relational, and material conditions and structuring logics of inequality" (Hesford et al., 2018, p. 2) and helps us consider issues of labor, citizenship, risk, and oppression. Graduate students experience varying states of precarity based on their positionality, agency, power, and professional and relational dynamics. Oftentimes, we are placed in positions that compromise our identities and agencies. When we face oppression or threats to our careers, stipends, health insurance, or programmatic roles, it takes courage and bravery to speak out, often at great risk to ourselves. Shui-Yin Sharon Yam, associate professor at the University of Kentucky, recently tweeted "In grad school, I learned how to critique ... I wish instead that grad school would give us more opportunities to imagine, to collaborate, and to build and rebuild" (2021). The desire to imagine, collaborate, and build is what drove many of us to join the Council for Programs in Scientific and Technical Communication Graduate Student Committee (CPTSC-GSC). Our work in the CPTSC-GSC involves imagining concerns as opportunities to build something better. Graduate programs vary in their definitions of technical communication, their priorities for professional development, and their availability of compatible mentors (Melonçon, 2009; Say, 2015). Doctoral attrition rates average around 50% (Wollast et al., 2018), with women and underrepresented students more likely to leave their programs than men, especially white men (Smallwood, 2004). This is where professional organizations can productively intervene, serving as common ground, equalizing access to resources, and drawing in faculty participation. In what follows, we open a conversation about graduate student precarity by examining unclear genre expectations, the labor and risk of voicing concerns, the experiences of multiply marginalized graduate students, and the need for mentorship. We hope to discover ways that organizations like CPTSC can work to intervene and support students.

Access and Equity in Academic Genre Knowledge

Genre awareness and discourse acquisition in the field are considered requisites for graduate student success (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). However, in our experience, graduate programs do not always communicate clearly or consistently about how to navigate genres in the profession, or in what ways students might critique and subvert those genres—even in our own writing-centric fields.

For example, GSC members who are first generation college students struggled in adapting to the expectations surrounding academic genres. One member recalled feeling unsure of how to approach writing a seminar paper during her first semester in graduate school. When she asked for help, the faculty instructor criticized the student rather than clarifying the genre, remarking that the student's paper was not at a graduate level.

This story illustrates the need to demystify knowledge and expectations surrounding academic genres, and the need for faculty to play a supportive role in this work. Faculty occupy spaces of power, positionality, and privilege (Walton et al., 2019) and should consider how they could open up access to academic genres instead of dictating who is and is not able to participate. In support of early career scholars, "making available the genres of power and cooperation … is a matter of social capacity and social justice" (Bazerman et al., 2009, p. xiv, as cited in Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010, p. 6). Rebecca Rickly and Kelli Cargile Cook (2017) similarly argue for more transparency when it comes to graduate education in technical communication, specifically relating to research preparation. Research, they explain, is messy and graduate students should be able to easily navigate genre expectations for articulating, focusing, conducting, and representing their research. While graduate students demonstrate proficiency in research-based, thesis-driven writing as a benchmark for program admission, they often come from disparate prior experiences and levels of access to resources. A lack of clarity around new or unfamiliar genres like academic proposals, statements (of purpose, research, teaching, and diversity), email with faculty and staff, exams, prospectuses, CVs, and job applications, to name a few, may therefore inhibit students from succeeding in graduate programs.

Encouraging greater transparency about genre expectations and sharing sample documents might be productive ways to address this issue (Cagle, 2020). Such efforts would align well with others in the field who are gathering and organizing disciplinary knowledge. This work can have a generative effect as well, allowing us to not only demystify but even "re-imagine" writing in the field (Badenhorst et al., 2021).

Complaint and Graduate Student Precarity

Voicing a concern (in other words, complaining) entails significant risk and emotional labor, especially for those in precarious positions. Sara Ahmed's newest book, *Complaint!*, helps frame our vulnerability as graduate students, displaying solidarity for those labelled as complainers and for those who want to complain but cannot or never receive the chance. After all, "it should not be the case that support from those

who are more established is necessary for a complaint to be heard" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 6).

While working on this article, many of us discussed our experiences investing emotional labor and taking significant risks to voice concerns, only to feel silenced, dismissed, or unheard. To be heard as making a tiresome complaint, Ahmed says, is to be heard as being tiresome, as distracting somebody from doing "important work elsewhere" (2021, p. 1). Herein lies an issue for graduate students: if we voice our concerns, will we be read as tiresome, a bother, or a "complainer?" Do our individual and collective identities allow us to voice concerns? Most importantly, will we be taken seriously? These questions partially reflect concerns about taking away important work time, as well. If complaining takes someone above us or in power away from important work (such as departmental duties, publishing obligations, advising, and teaching), are our complaints deeply heard and honored as important, or just heard as noise to be dismissed? "To hear someone as complaining is an effective way of dismissing someone. You do not have to listen to the content of what she is saying if she is just complaining or always complaining" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 1).

Ahmed (2021) says that those deemed tiresome complainers have something to teach us about complaints: the politics of how some are received, what it takes to refuse a message about who is important, and what is important. Graduate student bodies, well-being, stories, and our concerns are important, but oftentimes, it takes being re-traumatized in order to voice a "complaint." Many of us have felt powerlessness in gauging whether or not we should complain. Even in writing this, we had conversations about how to raise these issues in this article without making ourselves vulnerable to retaliation, as well as how to approach the issue without being seen/labelled as complainers. Those who are in positions to create change, to advocate for graduate students, and so on, *must* believe graduate students. To hear complaints, Ahmed says, can be to "hear that silence: what is not being said, what is not being done, what is not being dealt with" (2021, p. 7). For graduate students, voicing concerns is labor-intensive and risky. To not be listened to is to not be valued. Hear—truly hear—our complaints.

Precarity of Being Multiply Marginalized International Graduate Instructors

Some graduate students are marginalized not only due to their positionality and institutional power dynamics, but also because of their status as international scholars who may not enjoy the fundamental right of expression or the freedom to leave a program, as that could lead to deportation. We use Young's classification of oppression (1990) to contextualize this precarious environment within which international graduate student instructors of color with uncertain immigration status, language and socio-cultural differences work.

While the experience of oppression—exploitation, cultural imperialism, powerlessness, marginalization, and violence—varies based on personal attributes, oppression is a condition of groups; it is structural, embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols that can clash with a social group's sense of identity (Young, 1990). Graduate students' material circumstances enable exploitation, or expenditure of one group's labor to benefit another. Although international students bring diverse experiences into a program, we have to spend considerable energy navigating our way into western academic commonplaces. Considering that 70% of international students in the U.S. are from countries in the Global South (Duffin, 2020), we also face gateway oppression through cultural imperialism, where our perspectives may be rendered invisible due to dominant groups' unfamiliarity with these issues.

All this is exacerbated by the embodied oppression we face through powerlessness, where we have limited to no authority in decision-making and creativity (Walton et al., 2019). Asserting our autonomy could come at the cost of irking those in positions of power, and not everyone can afford to do that, especially international students. For instance, as a non-U.S. citizen, Meghalee Das used to reserve her opinion on socio-political issues in the U.S. But when she faced microaggressions and received student evaluations that referred to her race, she realized that identities can be imposed on us, and she had already been labelled and marginalized.

Faculty need to understand the impact of such comments on graduate students' mental health, and also make transparent policies on how student evaluations factor into performance evaluation and how we may be protected from backlash. Lean technical communication, which seeks to meet programmatic challenges under diverse conditions, aims at social responsibility without oppressing vulnerable populations like minority students and contingent labor (Johnson et al., 2018). If we want to sustain technical communication programs and accommodate the needs of an evolving U.S. higher education system, we must recognize and address the challenges faced by international graduate instructors and create support structures for them.

The Role of Mentorship in Graduate Student Precarity

Mentorship and support for the growing body of technical communication graduate students is unevenly distributed, pressuring graduate students to either "fit in" with existing institutional trends or "stand out" in a way that might mark them as an outsider. Because our work is dependent on the approval of faculty, lacking mentorship means we must invest time, effort, and energy to go outside our institutions and create the networks that are critical to our scholarly development and overall well-being.

We understand that providing mentorship is often taxing, unrecognized, or uncompensated, and that the expectation to mentor graduate students often has raced and gendered implications for faculty who are already expected to do more than their fair share of emotional and professional labor. Simultaneously, we recognize that mentorship is critical to graduate student success, particularly for marginalized students. While our view of mentorship includes "us[ing] cultural and social capital to advocate for us, and guid[ing] us through personal and professional decisions," (Gonzales et al., 2021, p. 21-22) there is also a critical need for increased representation for both mentors and mentees alike. As Natasha Jones writes, "... it wasn't until Miriam [F. Williams] that I had a mentor who looked like me and experienced the world, and more importantly, our academic field, in similar ways as I did" (Gonzales et al., 2021, p. 22). As such, we see increased mentorship as both a matter of addressing graduate student precarity and a critical step in engaging justice-oriented efforts to transform our field more largely.

As we have argued, professional organizations play a critical support role for graduate students as we develop our scholarship and build the networks that are foundational to so much of our lives. As we consider how to enact social justice approaches that "explicitly seek to redistribute and reassemble—or otherwise redress—power imbalances that systematically and systemically disenfranchise some stakeholders while privileging others" (Haas & Eble, 2018, p. 3), we also want to open conversations about forms and structures of mentorship that should exist for our most vulnerable voices, both within our institutions and beyond.

Conclusion

Our goal in the GSC is to make space to discuss and amplify issues of precarity, equity, and social justice that graduate students face, and collaboratively build supportive spaces, programming, and structures to ameliorate these issues. To that end, we are in the process of developing a mentor program, a writing group, and a repository of sample documents in various genres, among other initiatives. Our goal in this article is to begin a larger conversation centered on the positions of precarity we find ourselves in. We invite faculty and program administrators to join us in this conversation and to act as allies in our ongoing work. Together, we can dismantle many of the systems from which our precarity and oppression arise and productively seek, instead, "more opportunities to imagine, to collaborate, and to build and rebuild" (Yam, 2021).

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