

“Tending to My Life”: On Resilience and Academic Work

Charlotte Asmuth

Like many of my Documentarian colleagues, I use the term *work* often in my survey responses. Indeed, I mention work seventy-three times, nearly twice as often as the second most frequently used word. I attempt, at various times, to “sit down to work,” “get back to work,” “continue to work,” complete “student assessment work,” and so on. I refer to “my work” several times and my relationship to it. I mention “my actual work” once, ostensibly referring to academic work and not the work exerted during daily acts of self-care. In comparison, I mention writing (I should be working on a particular kind of writing, dissertation-related) only eleven times. I experience continuous anxiety about not doing the “right” kind of work: my dissertation work. At one point, I write, “I feel like my work is always shrouded in anxiety.”

In spring 2020, as the World Health Organization declares a global pandemic due to the rapid spread of COVID-19, I am supposed to be starting my dissertation. Instead, I spend the final six weeks of the semester shifting my course online, reading everything I can about online instruction, joining Facebook groups with grim names like “Pandemic Pedagogy,” commenting frequently on my students’ writing, drafting emails, and offering reassurance, support, and extended deadlines to students—in addition to planning trips to different grocery stores that might not be crowded, worrying about at-risk family members and my students, becoming increasingly disturbed by the racist discourse some public officials take up when discussing COVID-19, and trying to engage in acts of self-care.

In spring 2020, I’m managing to teach and support my students. But my normal “sit down and work” method for academic writing is not working anymore.

RESILIENCE AND ACADEMIC WORK

The image below (Figure 17.1) captures my workspace on March 28, 2020, at 10:18 AM. I call the couch in this picture my "gray work couch" and it acts as my desk for now. Piles of papers, note pads, pens, my attendance book, and course materials for the class I teach reside on one side of the couch. The laundry, the cats, or I occupy the other side. Books propped open like tents are on the floor in front of the couch. I have to dodge them on the way to the kitchen. When I need to meet virtually with a student, I take a small, empty cardboard box into the living room and prop my laptop on this box so my screen appears at eye level. While I normally dress "professionally" for class (collared shirt, ironed and tucked in, dress shoes), I have given that up for quarantine.



Figure 17.1. The author's "gray work couch" on March 28, 2020. A small pile of laundry and two throw pillows take up the right side of the couch. A laptop, binder, planner, textbook, legal pad, papers, and two other throw pillows occupy the left side of the couch.

Shortly after taking the photograph, I gather the small pile of laundry on the couch and dump it on the bed so that I have room to sit on the couch. At night, I carry this pile from the bed back to the couch, not folding these clothes until a few days later. The pile is on the smaller side in the photo because, each day, my partner and I grab the clothes we need from the pile before transferring it from the couch to the bed. Each time I interact with the laundry pile, I think of the psychology professor in Paul Prior and Jody Shipka’s “Chronotopic Lamination.” When she writes at home, this professor “sets the buzzer on the dryer so that approximately every forty-five minutes to an hour she is pulled away from the text to tend the laundry downstairs” (180). As she deals with the laundry, she thinks about the text she is working on. This routine, a way of managing her attention, is an example of what Prior and Shipka call “environment-selecting and -structuring practices” (ESSPs), which they define as “the intentional deployment of external aids and actors to shape, stabilize, and direct consciousness in service of the task at hand” (219). Seemingly mundane practices like those of the psychology professor are ways in which agents can exert control over—or reshape-for-now—the material environments in which they compose. What Prior and Shipka’s participants reveal is that academic work routines are influenced by dispersed practices, life histories, emotions, etc., some of which appear to have little to do with the kind of academic writing I am experiencing so much anxiety about.

Here, for example, is how one of Prior and Shipka’s other participants, Melissa Orlie (a well-published academic), responds when Shipka asks about “intrusions” to her work routine:

I don’t see the tending to my life as an interruption [to my work]. Um, from the time, I remember it from being reading Marx as an undergraduate that I had this whole sense of, you need a really broad definition of work. And that the, *the conditions of work, you know, having good food, having the garden watered—all those things are about creating a sense of well-being for me so that I can work, and I don’t consider them things not, you know, not to do, um, they’re actually part of the process and I have to create time for them.* (222-23; original emphasis)

Orlie’s philosophy of work is clearly influenced by her awareness that academic work is not only intellectual work—that caring for her

body sustains her academic work, too. What stands out to me when I re-read this passage is how her description of her working life is so unlike most of the descriptions that are available in our field. Orlie's practice of "tending to [her] life" is part of her work. Graduate students are, too often, not beneficiaries of this kind of advice about work habits from faculty mentors.

There is some evidence that conversations about work habits happen between faculty advisors and graduate students (e.g., Tulley). But graduate students are rarely privy to richly detailed accounts of what day-to-day academic work looks and feels like. I don't point this out to blame my lack of scholarly productivity during the pandemic on the absence of these accounts, for I know that I am not alone in feeling "unproductive" during this time. I also believe that "being productive" in the recognized sense need not be our priority right now (as Aisha Ahmad argues in a well-circulated *Chronicle of Higher Education* article). Rather, I point this out because the pandemic has left me struggling to establish some semblance of a work routine without having had a particularly structured one in place before.

While many scholars in our field specialize in capturing, in granular detail, the working/writing scenes of everyday people, we have yet to consistently turn a critical eye to our own sites of work/writing and our own working/writing practices. Indeed, academic work routines are still very much occluded in our field and academia in general, emerging only occasionally and only for those who are listening and watching closely. Over the last few years, I've caught glimpses of colleagues' private work routines. A professor makes a passing comment in a graduate seminar about the role that procrastination plays in her writing process: "When I have article revisions to work on, cleaning the fridge becomes suddenly important." I see this same professor walk laps around the building during breaks in class. One professor's office door always appears locked as he prefers to work from home. In a writing group, another professor shares a draft of a conference talk that is in outline form and confesses that she's not quite sure what her takeaways are yet. An advisor tells me he removed his Wi-Fi card from his laptop during the hours he worked on his dissertation.

But none of these fragmentary observations are particularly helpful to me right now. I don't know how that procrasti-cleaning professor structures her work days, responds to reviewer feedback on her writing, or even how she manages a cluttered email inbox. And right now,

I’m hesitant to ask any potentially overburdened faculty mentors for their advice. Instead, to help manage my anxiety, I reflect on previous situations in which I have been resilient.

The first time I taught the 300-level course I’m teaching in spring 2020, I was mourning the end of a five-year relationship and applying to doctoral programs. Two weeks of class sessions were canceled due to snow days, so I was already trying to make adjustments to the course schedule on the fly. And then the pipes in the house I rented burst while I was out of town (attending 4C17, incidentally), flooding the downstairs. When I returned, the house was uninhabitable. I spent the next six weeks in temporary housing near campus while the house was being repaired. At the same time, I navigated the process of deciding which school to attend for my PhD, mentored new graduate teaching assistants, and tried to finish teaching two classes, one of which I had never taught before and wasn’t entirely sure I was ready to teach in the first place. My primary source of comfort, my dog, was not allowed in my temporary housing, so I arranged for my ex to care for him. Occasionally, I snuck him into my room for an afternoon. Sometimes, I brought him to my classes and the Writing Center, where he quickly became the “Writing Center mascot” and a source of joy for students who took photos with him. The day before I left for 4C19, during the semester when I was finishing my doctoral coursework, my dog died.

These experiences remind me that I have worked during challenging times before and that I have gotten through these difficult times. I need this reminder right now, when my anxiety about completing my dissertation and entering a potentially bleak job market persists. Right now, like Melissa Orlie, I am “tending to my life” (Prior and Shipka 222), even if some parts of that life have been put on hold. And yet, I can’t help but wonder how different my current work habits might be if faculty mentors had openly discussed their own work habits with me.

WAYS FORWARD: “INTRUSIVE MENTORING”

About six years ago, my MA advisor offered to talk about managing multiple academic projects at the same time. We were sitting in his office and I was running through a few ideas I had for a potential research project for my MA thesis. I said, “I have a few things I want to work on, but don’t really know how to juggle them.” He replied with something like, “That’s something we can talk about. I’d be happy to

talk about that sometime." I nodded as his offer hung in the air. I was perhaps too unsure of how to initiate such a meeting (and unsure of what to expect he would say, which is precisely why I *should* have taken him up on this offer) and neither of us brought it up again. Not taking him up on his offer remains a big regret.

In the conclusion of *How Writing Faculty Write*, Christine Tulley writes, "Beyond seminar papers and writing for publication/digital publication courses in some doctoral programs, any additional graduate writing instruction within rhetoric and composition as a field has largely been the result of a one-to-one modeling" (150). She thus argues, "We need to go beyond just modeling how we write for our graduate students and actually teach them how we know how to do it" (150). By extension, I argue, faculty mentors ought to go beyond simply modeling their work habits (e.g., writing in the office, as many faculty do) to having frank discussions with graduate students about their work habits and how they developed these habits. It is especially important to have these conversations now because (1) they can foster resilience in graduate students and (2) given the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19, academics may be working from home for an extended period of time again. Thus, graduate students will be unable to witness faculty mentors who normally work in the office exhibiting productive work habits. Below, I provide a few suggestions for both faculty and graduate students about how to initiate these conversations.

Graduate students who wish to initiate these discussions with faculty mentors might find Tulley's interview questions, provided in her book's appendix, a useful place to start. In addition, graduate students might approach their advisors with questions such as the following: How do you structure your work time? How do you balance pressure to publish with your other responsibilities? How do you respond to reviewer feedback? Do your writing habits vary depending on whether you're writing for administration, teaching, or publication purposes? What does blending self-care and academic work look like for you? Can you tell me about a time in your work life in which you felt resilient? What did that look like for you?

To that end, faculty mentors should volunteer responses to the above questions before they even have to be asked. Additionally, faculty can introduce mentees to the concept of "environment-selecting and -structuring practices" and illustrate this concept with examples from their own working lives. (I have done this in undergraduate courses

I teach and students find the idea that writing environments affect composing practices fascinating.) Faculty can also share and discuss draft versions of journal articles with the accompanying cover letter, reviewers' comments, and their responses to their comments. I realize that doing so requires a certain amount of vulnerability, emotional labor, and time, but this practice aligns with recent calls in our field for faculty to "[m]ake academic practice and conventions accessible" (Mckoy et al. para 3) and to have more open conversations about their relationship to work as well as their experiences with failure (Driscoll et al.; LaFrance and Corbett). To be clear, I believe that had I received a form of the proactive "intrusive mentoring" I'm advocating for here, I might already have a structured work routine in place or a flexible set of strategies on which to draw to structure my work.¹ While this routine would likely need to be adjusted during the pandemic, it would give me a place to start and I might not feel so adrift.

While I have provided suggestions for graduate students about how to initiate conversations about work habits, the burden of this labor should largely fall on faculty, especially because marginalized graduate students already take on an enormous amount of emotional and material labor, compounded by their economic and institutional precarity (see Colón; González; Kumari; Madden et al.; Mckoy et al.; Tang and Andriamanalina). For example, Lida Colón describes the extra work Black graduate students often take on, tapping into networks like Digital Black Lit and Composition (DBLAC) to find support for their research interests and "their entire selves outside of the academic space," because their graduate courses do not center Black scholarship and their institutions are predominately white.

1 In the 1980s, academic counselor Walter Earl coined the term "intrusive advising" to describe "deliberate structured student intervention at the first indication of academic difficulty in order to motivate a student to seek help" (28). Earl's model involves inviting probationary students to reflect on "factors that most contributed to the[ir] probationary status" and to work with their advisors to develop a plan of action for increased academic success (see pages 31-32). Earl seems to be motivated by deficit assumptions about students, however: his theory of "intrusive advising" operates from the premise that students' "[d]eficiencies" in orienting to university life are "treatable" if students can be taught certain skills (30). By contrast, I use "intrusive mentoring" (a term others have used before) to refer to a proactive form of support for graduate students that both makes academic practices explicit and aims to change the institutional structures in which graduate students work.

The conversations I allude to above are not easy and will look different depending on the mentor and mentee. Furthermore, these conversations require an enormous amount of trust between mentors and mentees, which is not necessarily easy to establish. As a non-binary, queer, white graduate student, for example, it is hard enough for me to establish trusting relationships with mentors when I am repeatedly misgendered by them. It can be even more challenging for BIPOC graduate students to establish trusting relationships with mentors in predominantly white institutional spaces.

Thus, I argue, graduate faculty need to view supporting graduate students' work habits as an equity issue in our field. While the conversations I describe above are a good start for making work practices visible and more accessible to graduate students (and, if desired, subject to revision by graduate students), they are still not enough. "Ethical mentorship" should be formally institutionalized and not limited to one-on-one mentoring sessions (Mckoy et al.; see also Tulley 150). Mentoring graduate work habits must be built sustainably into graduate programs and graduate writing courses, even when those courses are not "Writing for Publication" courses. At my institution, no writing group was formally established within my program until a visiting scholar took on the labor of doing so. It remains to be seen whether this writing group will continue without the presence of this visiting scholar.

The global pandemic has disrupted all of our working lives in some way. Some graduate students (and faculty) will again be forced to work from home when they are unaccustomed to doing so, have increased child care responsibilities, or do not have access to a quiet space to work. How can faculty teach graduate students to take up useful work habits and care for themselves during times of collective crisis? How can faculty support graduate students' work practices when both their own and graduate students' working conditions are increasingly precarious and inconsistent? Now, more than ever, it may be especially difficult for some of us (not to mention our undergraduate students) to restructure our working environments. But it is crucial for faculty to support graduate students as they try to do so, for the futures of junior scholars, and by extension our field, depend on it.

WORKS CITED

- Ahmad, Aisha S. "Why You Should Ignore All That Coronavirus-Inspired Productivity Pressure." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 March

- 2020, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-You-Should-Ignore-All-That/248366>.
- Colón, Lida. "Don't Talk About It, Be About It: A Model of Material Support for Black Graduate Students." *XChanges: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Technical Communication, Rhetoric, and Writing Across the Curriculum*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2020, <https://xchanges.org/dont-talk-about-it-15-1>.
- Driscoll, Dana Lynn, S. Rebecca Leigh, and Nadia Francine Zamin. "Self-Care as Professionalization: A Case for Ethical Doctoral Education in Composition Studies." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2020, pp. 453–80.
- Earl, Walter R. "Intrusive Advising of Freshmen in Academic Difficulty." *NACADA Journal*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1988, pp. 27–33.
- González, Caleb Lee. "Emerging through Critical Race Theory Counter-storytelling in a Rhetoric and Composition Graduate Studies Context." *XChanges: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Technical Communication, Rhetoric, and Writing Across the Curriculum*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2020, <https://xchanges.org/emerging-through-crt-counter-storytelling-15-1>.
- Kumari, Ashanka. *Remaking Identities, Reworking Graduate Study: Stories from First-Generation-to-College Rhetoric and Composition Ph.D. Students on Navigating the Doctorate*. 2019. University of Louisville, Ph.D. dissertation. ThinkIR, <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/etd/3206>.
- LaFrance, Michelle, and Steven J. Corbett. "Discourse Community Fail! Negotiating Choices in Success/Failure and Graduate-Level Writing Development." *Graduate Writing Across the Disciplines: Identifying, Teaching, and Supporting*, edited by Marilee Brooks-Gillies, Elena G. Garcia, Soo Hyon Kim, Katie Manthey, and Trixie G. Smith, WAC Clearinghouse, 2020, pp. 295–314, <https://doi.org/10.37514/ATD-B.2020.0407.2.12>.
- Madden, Shannon, Michele Eodice, Kirsten T. Edwards, and Alexandria Lockett, editors. *Learning from the Lived Experiences of Graduate Student Writers*. Utah State UP, 2020.
- Mckoy, Temptaous, Hannah Rule, Dawn Opel, Karriann Soto Vega, and Ashanka Kumari. "CCCC Statement of Professional Guidance for Mentoring Graduate Students." Conference on College Composition and Communication, November 2019, <https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/professional-guidance-for-mentoring-graduate-students/>.
- Prior, Paul, and Jody Shipka. "Chronotopic Lamination: Tracing the Contours of Literate Activity." *Writing Selves/Writing Societies: Research from Activity Perspectives*, edited by Charles Bazerman and David R. Russell, WAC Clearinghouse, 2003, pp. 180–238, <https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2003.2317.2.06>.

Tang, Jasmine Kar, and Noro Andriamanalina. "Rhonda Left Early to Go to Black Lives Matter': Programmatic Support for Graduate Writers of Color." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2016, pp. 10-16.

Tulley, Christine E. *How Writing Faculty Write: Strategies for Process, Product, and Productivity*. Utah State UP, 2018.