

Graduate Students Professionalizing in Digital Time/Space: A View From “Down Below”

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Abstract

As they write in multiple online social spaces, graduate students employ digital writing practices and experiences unaccounted for in previous narratives of professionalization. These practices, which revolve around the multiple spaces assembled on their computer screens, are often productive for graduate students. Their digital multitasking allows them to practice employing theoretical concepts in unexpected personal sites while establishing connections and creating professional networks. However, these practices also evoke strong affective responses as graduate students often express guilt or shame about the extent to which these digital practices do not feel like “work.” In this article that draws from a multi-phased research project employing time-use diaries, screen captures, and interviews, the authors describe work-related digital writing moments of two graduate students, Phillip and Alyssa. After describing these practices, as well as Phillip and Alyssa’s affective reactions to them, the authors reflect on the state of professionalizing practice in the time/space associated with writing in digital environments, then raise questions for future inquiry.

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1. Introduction

If we consider objects as “information users find useful in a given task,” the computer screen of a writer at work is a hub where diverse objects can be found side by side (Hart-Davidson, 2005, p. 30). The widespread digitization of our writing lives means that our most important relationships, tools, resources, projects, and activities are often represented in and bound closely by screens. Computers and computer screens do many things, but they certainly bring together a range of artifacts of personal importance that might seem unrelated otherwise. This centralization of tools, activities, and relationships on the computer screen has important implications for the way that people experience many activities in which writing is central.

Similarly, the process of becoming a professional comes with its own diverse set of relationships, tools and activities. Seemingly disparate objects and activities have to be connected in order for people to learn what it means to do the work of participating in academic communities. In working toward becoming professionals, graduate students occupy many positions (e.g., teacher, student, mentee, colleague, writer, and observer). They are also tasked with finding appropriate

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ways to bring together multiple acts to fulfill requirements of academic programs or professional responsibilities (e.g., making Curriculum Vitae, writing course papers, completing exams, writing theses or dissertations, creating syllabi, and responding to student writing). At the same time, graduate students must complete other less-often-articulated professionalizing tasks related to building relationships with peers and mentors and creating eventual networks for themselves that extend past the boundaries of their current institutions and positions.

This research deals with the ways in which graduate students negotiate the multiple tasks of professionalization in an age where digital writing often serves as the connective thread through which individuals do personal and professional work. In the writing lives of the two Rhetoric and Composition graduate students we focus on, Phillip and Alyssa, multiple materials, people, emotions, and technologies contribute to the production of texts and relationship-building related to the everyday work of professionalizing. Many of these materials are digital writing materials and genres that are not traditionally the focus of studies of academic professionalization, but nevertheless constitute the current writing work of being a graduate student. In Phillip and Alyssa's work sessions, offline and online identities, print and digital tools, and social and work experiences become difficult to separate; their computer screens exist as a microcosm of this larger phenomenon, assembling a multiplicity of writing for different purposes to different audiences.

While performing online writing in the multiple roles associated with work in their graduate program, Alyssa and Phillip do more than simply draw on the Internet for inspiration; they seek out alternative digital spaces that allow them to perform ideas they are learning in classroom spaces, and they draw on the networked nature of social media sites in order to connect to and better understand scholars and ideas in their field. At the same time, their narratives suggest that the nature of contemporary writing work—where personal and professional are closely linked—can cause confusion and even guilt for writers attempting to accomplish singular goals like composing an academic document. Seeing graduate students' digital writing practices in dialogue with their affective responses to them leads us to more general questions about the relationship between work, affect, and the experience of digital writing today. Alyssa and Phillip's narratives suggest that many people are currently struggling to reconcile the reality of their writing practices with their expectations about what "serious" writing work looks like and how it feels. Importantly, many of Alyssa and Phillip's actual practices stand in contradistinction to an idealized model of writing work. Within this model, to be truly working hard—or seriously writing—includes implicit assumptions about what kinds of human, technological, and spatial participants and materials should be involved—and which should not. When these materials become blurred in the *mélange* of windows on computer screens, people often experience intense emotional responses. Alyssa, in particular, often expresses guilt that activities like reading blogs take her away from her "real work" while Phillip tends toward joking about his forays into email and social networking.

In this essay, we draw on recent attempts to describe what real-life writing in the digital age is like, particularly to accounts that pay attention to physically moving, arranging, mixing, and remixing all kinds of materials (Anderson, 2005; DeVoss & Webb, 2008; digirhetcollective, 2008; Prior & Shipka, 2003; Shipka, 2007; Slattery, 2007). With this scholarship in mind, we dialogue literature on graduate student professionalization with Michel de Certeau's (1984) theory of everyday practice in order to create a methodological apparatus to access a view from "down below" that pays attention to moments of professionalizing writing that often escape formalized accounts (p. 93). Next, we focus in particular on two vignettes that exemplify two common digital writing practices: digital multitasking, and connecting with others and their ideas through social media outlets. These writing moments help us understand when and how graduate students struggle with the tension between using resources like social media for pleasure and for work. We proceed to offer instances of when such digital multitasking moves actually prove productive for graduate students and conclude by discussing the implications of these practices and tensions for current understandings of professionalization. We hope that the portraits of actual practice we generate not only add complexity to current accounts of digital writing and graduate professionalizing, but also point to the efficacy of looking at localized writing practices as they are experienced by those who perform them.

2. Accessing Self-Sponsored Moments of Professionalizing Writing

Scholarship that examines the trajectory of individuals like graduate and professional students as they move from novices to experts in a given field has been broadly important to rhetoric and writing studies. Particularized accounts of graduate student writing from scholars have focused on the institutionally motivated writing performances of graduate and professional students that place them on trajectories from novice to expert writers within their respective disciplinary domains (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Geisler, 1994; Prior, 1998; Schryer, Lingard, Spafford, & Garwood, 2003). The

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