Tactically Transgressive Teaching: Dis/Empowerment as Graduate Student-Instructors

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Introduction

Graduate student-instructors embody a fundamental precarity in the university system. We're often exploited and overworked as well as expected to be grateful for the chance to work in academia. Though we serve a critical role in staffing introductory level courses at many universities as we prepare for careers in and beyond the academy, our labor as graduate student-instructors often becomes invisible, as the result of the compounding impacts of university or department budgets, our (in)dispensability, and our identities. For example, first-year writing (FYW)—often one of the first classes undergraduate students enroll in–is an essential service, "[cultivating] and [supporting] students' sense of belonging" as well as improving student performance and retention (Flood, 2020, para. 1), which is frequently offered to graduate students for assistantships across writing and rhetoric departments and university contexts. However, even as graduate students provide essential labor, such as teaching FYW and other service courses, our status as students and teachers is constantly in flux–keeping us in an often precarious, unstable state.

The precarity that graduate student-instructors experience is further complicated when we consider the tensions between being a student and an instructor. We are often charged with preparing our students to think critically and engage with the world while in our classrooms and beyond (Agboka, 2018; Katz, 1992; Simmons & Grabill, 2007). The classroom is not a separate microcosm from the "real world," and we must consider how to broach both "practical" knowledge and theory to prepare our students for tackling wicked problems (Carlson, 2021). Yet our status as graduate students–and therefore learners–is emphasized; we must be "experts" for our students, who may only be a few years younger than we are, yet are also framed as inexperienced learners working within the constraints of a broader system. As new laws and discourses develop and constrain classrooms and campuses, our lack of formal protections, such as those of tenure or other benefits full-time, non-tenure track faculty may receive, aggravate our precarity–especially student-instructors of color or other minoritized identities.

As graduate student-instructors of writing courses, we recognize that our positionality allows us to resist institutions in coalition (Chavez, 2011; Haywood, 2019; Pritchard, 2019) with our students. Because coalitions may be "temporary and goal oriented" and are designed for "certain kinds of action" (Chavez, 2013, p. 24), this labor may take on a variety of forms, depending on an institution's structure, a department's policies, and student-instructors' pedagogies. And still, we must acknowledge that graduate student-instructors are sometimes complicit in oppressive classrooms or harm in higher

education broadly (as our examples below illustrate). However, institutional structures or department policies offer us some protection, too. For example, if a student emails the chair and says an instructor isn't grading on time, referring to a syllabus can be a form of protection. As early career scholar-teachers, shouldn't we want protection–especially when we're still learning and our teacher identities are "in process" (Restaino, 2012)?

We argue that graduate students as learner-teachers are uniquely able to stand at the precipice of tactically transgressive teaching, at the boundaries of an in-between in ways that full-time faculty may not. Solidarity underpins these coalitions and commitments to social justice in ways that graduate student-instructors must attend precisely because, as fellow students, we work within the same neoliberal university system as our students. While we remain at risk of being harmed by these systems in similar ways to undergraduate students, our looking glass is only peculiar because it lets us see these risks and problems as both enforcers and subjects. That said, keeping an eye on each of our roles lets us see the gaps between these roles, in order to go beyond mere invitation and subvert dominant narratives enough to create a transgressive classroom.

Following hooks (1994), we identify the classroom not only as a communal space but also a space where injustice and oppression reproduce themselves, if unaddressed. Given the social justice turn in technical and professional communication, the inclusion of social justice and ethics to scholarship and syllabi over the past couple decades enables the classroom hooks' (1994) describes and the workplace to imbricate. In our view, education should subvert the neoliberal approach that universities and courses seem to pursue; thus, as scholars interested in social justice, we seek to transgress these norms that reproduce such oppression with, instead, a more nuanced attention to criticality. We believe that student-instructors are uniquely positioned to resist the neoliberal atomization of education as job training without intentional attention to social and ethical impact–yet we remain agents of the institution. There exists a simultaneous power in our precarity, as graduate student-instructors are afforded the distinctive student-instructor positionality.

In this article, we contend with the following questions: What affordances and constraints do graduate student-instructors face in enacting social justice-oriented practices through our classrooms and pedagogies? How can graduate student-instructors act tactically in the classroom and, thus, agitate for change when constrained by the neoliberal university and the exploitation of graduate student labor? How might building coalitions with students as student-instructors generate student empowerment in the academy and beyond? We consider these questions through social justice technical communication (Walton, Moore, & Jones, 2019) and tactical technical communication (Kimball, 2017) in order to provide a reflexive teaching framework that provides graduate student-instructors opportunities to develop transgressive teaching classrooms.

We explore these questions in the following narratives. Alex's narrative comes from his experience teaching first year writing, while Nicole's narrative draws from her time

teaching both first year writing and an upper-level writing center course. These experiences were foundational to our development as pedagogues and scholar-teachers concerned with social justice. By analyzing these narratives, we propose that our complex and precarious positionality does not foreclose the possibility of social justice in our classrooms, even when we are faced with institutional constraints on how and what we teach. Although graduate student-instructors may be expected to meet the demands of the university and maintain good standing, we seek to step back and examine our positionalities and experiences in order to consider tactically transgressive teaching.

Alex's Narrative

In my time as a graduate teaching assistant, I have sought to inject social justice into my pedagogy. When I taught at a previous institution (a public research university in Ohio) I was told that I was prohibited from altering course materials and outcomes by state law. Ohio has such high rates of transfer between schools in the state that the government has worked with public institutions to standardize the first-year writing curriculum, so that students might transfer that credit painlessly and without struggle.

I highlight this not to insinuate that Ohio's laws on academic teaching are regressive and stringent as those in Florida, where university instructors are banned from teaching so-called "identity politics" or using other socially conscious pedagogies (Walsh, 2024, para. 13), but rather to examine how I as a graduate student-instructor was expected to take what was given to me and work with it. Everything was thought out ahead of time for me—which I was (and still am) grateful for. Yet even this level of structure, ostensibly to protect me as I learned, did not prepare me for talking about wicked problems or issues of social justice. And I was unprepared; I remember taking first-year writing at the same institution, and how the instructor of record did nothing to address another student's firm conviction that homophobia should be acceptable. I was already nervous that trying to tamp down on hateful comments in class might get me in trouble with a more conservative student body at a more conservative institution.

Lyiscott's (2014) TED talk "3 Ways to Speak English" was a suggested reading for the class and is a text I still use to teach students about positionality, power, and privilege as they think about rhetorical situations, themselves as writers, and their audiences. The text is often well received, but not by everyone in my classrooms. Some students seem reluctant to engage with the text as it is presented–they misunderstand, one way or another, that what Lyiscott is talking about is a much deeper, wicked injustice than simply changing one's tone when sending a professor or a supervisor an email. I have had students write blog posts or discuss this in class with their peers, only to be confronted by the suggestion that Lyiscott *isn't really* talking about being a Black woman, or that these experiences aren't unique to her positionality. Others are more willing to discuss Lyiscott's experiences in more open, direct terms—and students have even argued about this among themselves debating whether or not "race" is really a part of this video, or if discussing it is really necessary in class.

I bring up this anecdote in order to draw attention to the students who have taken this text as I present it. The classroom, after all, is a communal space, and it's my job to ensure that discussion is smooth and even-tempered. Yet, I am often disquieted by these moments and am conflicted about my own role as an agent of the university. I seek to challenge my students, especially as an instructor who has taught at two predominantly white universities, so that they empathize with others who do not share their privilege and positionality. Yet I must not do so antagonistically, both to avoid being stereotyped as an "angry ethnic" and to avoid losing my job. I certainly would not so directly challenge a student unless they were expressing hateful, racist, transphobic, homophobic, or other bigoted responses, although it would likely be in the community's best interest to remove such a student from the space. How do I walk this line? How do I challenge my students to think about the ways that the world is unjust or that they as future professionals, citizens, and writers might continue to perpetuate injustices?

I'll briefly share another few anecdotes, before Nicole shares her experiences and we turn to analysis and theory. For example:

- A student shares with me that they think vaccines are a scam, and that they can do their own research. I suggest that the research they submit for their research paper isn't quite up to academic standards, and they insinuate I am biased. Teaching research practices becomes charged and uncomfortable, and the student insinuates that if they don't receive a high grade, they will file a complaint against me.
- In reading excerpts from Katz's (1992) "The Ethic of Expediency," a student suggests that none of their classmates would ever find themselves in such a position. It would be obvious to them that they were doing something wrong, and they wouldn't participate.
- During an online Zoom class, a student makes a flippant comment about how "certain people" make everything about race. Another student argues with them in the comments, taking offense and citing their positionality in their rationale.

I can tell students to discuss politics outside of the classroom on their own time, or to be civil, or suggest that a student's dissenting view might change over time. In the spirit of the classroom as a communal space, I must balance the needs of the entire classroom with the needs of vulnerable, marginalized students. Community must be fostered, and it is multifaceted. Approaching classroom-as-community without building community with vulnerable students is fraught with tensions and contradictions that can be constraining, especially considering my commitments to social justice pedagogy and preparing students to tackle the never-solvable wicked problems (like racism) that aren't "finally solvable" in one fell swoop (Marback, 2009, p. 399). It's not enough to passively assert that students will hopefully experience more in their lives and become well-rounded enough to change their ways. In these situations, I wonder who my commitments are to. As a university employee, my commitments are to all of my students. How do I ensure that this commitment to the classroom as a supposedly neutral space doesn't rely on fostering oppressive narratives? And, if community is reciprocal, what am I to expect from my students in building and maintaining these

spaces? Can I even enter coalition with my students, considering that I have power over them as an instructor?

Nicole's Narrative

For me, coalition with my students is deeply entrenched in critical reflection and conversation about positionality (Pouncil & Sanders, 2022). My own identity as a mixed-race, Japanese American is critical to how I approach my classrooms, students, and curriculum. My identity is also critical to how I perceive myself in the university and, surely, how the university perceives me. Alongside my identity, being a graduate student-instructor requires constant reflexivity as I navigate the expectations of the university and my students' interests within my pedagogy. The balance across requirements, social justice, and student interest differs across institutions, but most difficult are those with the least room for my own intervention against assignments or learning outcomes I deem harmful. Nevertheless, I strive toward coalition with my students in every course I teach.

As a graduate student who has taught first-year writing and other related courses on the West Coast and in the Midwest, the resistance I sense toward my social justice-oriented aims from my students is varied. Unlike Alex's experiences, my university contexts invited working with much looser expectations. For example, I designed an Asian American solidarity unit that was welcomed at an Asian American, Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI). I have also developed units on specific genres, such as resumes and cover letters or the introduction, methods, results, and discussion research paper structure (e.g. IMRaD), that students met with, admittedly, initial disdain followed by gratitude for the coursework's role in supporting acquiring on-campus jobs and various internships.

Despite the room I've had to grow my pedagogy, being a scholar-teacher engaging social justice and technical skills in my classrooms still harbors the complexities of solidarity-building with students that Alex notes. For example, social justice-oriented pedagogies can invite the centering of marginalized students in a setting where we are traditionally a minority: despite my Asian American unit being taught at an AANAPISI, requiring at least 10 percent of its full-time undergraduate enrollment to identify as any of the named communities, that does not mean the classroom itself reflects that 10 percent. Moreover, social justice work may simultaneously alienate students accustomed to being in the majority or those who are simply from areas or experiences that haven't invited particular conversations.

To add to this tension in solidarity-building with students who I share positionality with is the greater interest I sense from students for coursework that appears more directly connected to employment. My IMRaD units were centered around a comparison between majors or minors; though tedious for students set on a degree, those still narrowing their choices appeared pleased that a general education course the university required allowed them to focus on a "real-world" decision. Similarly, the course I taught that culminated in the opportunity to interview for employment in the

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university writing center concentrated on themes like active listening, writing center theory, language justice, anti-racism, and the obvious need for building a consultation toolkit. Broadly speaking, the course taught students both technical and theoretical skills. Managing both, however, was a design of the context, not mine. And so, prioritizing both the technical skills students want with the critical thinking and social justice I value remains a puzzle.

Social justice and technical skills are not at odds with one another in our classrooms or beyond (Katz, 1992; Simmons & Grabill, 2007). And yet, introductory courses and many not-so-experienced graduate student-instructors are asked to wrestle with the fact that the students coming to our courses are paying for our class and want it to be uniquely worth their time—and understandably so—while we are working with curriculum constraints, complex identities and backgrounds, as well as all the other labor required during graduate education. In engaging students with simultaneously social justice-oriented and skills-based pedagogies, I have found myself conflicted. I'm constantly reflecting on how I can effectively build solidarity with my students, student to student, and what it means if my syllabi outline the notion that students and instructor alike are learning together. Moreover, if both learning and coalition are reciprocal, what am I expecting from my students? What am I giving them, and what am I receiving from them? How much learning are my students seeing me do, and how does that affect coalition?

Tactically Transgressive Teaching

The answers to the questions we have each posed aren't clear-cut. But we argue that the framework of tactically transgressive teaching we pursue provides graduate student-instructors ways to engage our varied institutional contexts safely and productively.

In tactical technical communication's nascence, Kimball (2009) builds off de Certeau's (1984) ideas to illustrate that strategies are institutional, while tactics are individual. Specifically, Kimball (2009) discusses understanding "technical documentation culturally–how deeply documentation can be integrated into the lives and fantasies of people in contemporary culture as they go beyond user-as-practitioner to user-as-producer and user-as-citizen" (p. 82-83). This dynamic reveals the importance of context and culture for tactics that we find critical for our transgressive teaching framework. For us, tactical technical communication becomes a framework for teaching which enables graduate student-instructors to work within the constraints of the neoliberal institution through individualized tactics in their classrooms. In short: these teaching practices are tactical because they go beyond user-as-practitioner or user-as-producer, playing with the boundaries surrounding student-as-learner and instructor-as-expert. We as graduate instructors must know when to transgress against rules and structures, and when to make room for our students to act as experts, teachers, and co-conspirators in a socially just classroom.

To be a tactically transgressive instructor likely means working within an oppressive system—even if only to undermine it in small but critical ways. This could be as simple as deciding when to enforce an attendance policy, or it could take the form of broaching difficult conversations while still remaining visibly within the lines of policy and university rules. We suggest similarities between la Paperson's model of hotwiring (2017) and Kimball's (2017) tactical technical communication framework. Whereas Kimball is specific that tactical technical communication is about writers "sharing technical information for their own purposes" (p. 1) rather than through or for official purposes, we propose that the essence of tactical technical communication can be "hotwired" for social justice-oriented pedagogy. In other words, to be tactically transgressive is to understand our limits as students, instructors, and people in order to act for ends beyond the classroom or institution. There seems to be something unique about our role as graduate student-instructors that distinguishes us from other non-tenured instructors, though we do not diminish or discredit their positionality as likewise precarious members of the academy. Rather, we suggest that our status as student-learners puts us in a distinct position to consider how to transgress.

Coalitions, Publics, and Social Justice Technical Communication

Though the classroom is not necessarily a public space, the writing classroom prepares students for responsibly engaging with publics (Grabill & Simmons, 1998). hooks (1994) identifies the classroom as a communal space, and scholarship on publics and coalitions (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Chavez, 2011; Walton, Moore, & Jones, 2019) show why classrooms must take up issues outside of them, blurring these publics and spaces together. The classroom is not an inherently just space; social injustices may be reproduced and reified in the classroom (Agboka, 2018; Katz, 1992; Legg & Strantz, 2021; Sackey, 2018), and instructors must take great care to not only avoid harmful or unjust pedagogies but to actively engage students and agitate towards social justice. Pedagogy must not merely allow students the chance to engage with social justice, but should be transgressive in nature, when possible.

The differences between merely allowing students the chance to engage with social justice and transgressing in service of social justice are questions of comfort and discomfort, and great care. To transgress necessarily involves agitating in some way, even if these transgressive attitudes are not obvious at first glance. Merely lecturing students is not inherently transgressive, though it may appear so to students who resist reflecting on hierarchies and (their own) dominant positionalities.

Resistance, Positionality, and Risk

Following Restaino (2012), we see graduate student-instructors as situated in the in-between of students and instructors. Using Hannah Arendt's theory of labor, work, and action, Restaino mentors four graduate student-instructors during their first semester teaching, finding that they are "unquestionably still 'in process'" (2012, p. 58) as they develop teacher identities. With several years of teaching experience between

us, the process of developing teacher identities did not end alongside the conclusion of the first semester of teaching.

Complicating our developing student-instructor identities, we are allowed relatively little power within the institution, even in our classrooms. We are expected to defer to "official" university policy, and we only sometimes have room to design curriculums that reflect our research or values. Even though the classroom is a politicized space (Berlin, 1988), to discuss political issues is distasteful at best and potentially harmful at worst. We often cannot alter 100- or 200-level courses or innovate pedagogically, making it more difficult for us to learn or push the boundaries of our pedagogy. This is further compounded by issues of power, positionality, and privilege (Walton, Moore, & Jones, 2019). The role of graduate student-instructor is an assemblage of tensions and contradictions between our positionalities, our roles within the university, and our capacity to act as instructors. Where does our commitment to stand for social justice end–and how do we uphold that commitment when it is in tension with a university's policies?

The assemblage of our positionalities may cause us to encounter harms or injustices. Instructors who are (multiply) marginalized contend with microaggressions and macroaggressions relating to race, gender, ethnicity, and other identities. At the same time, instructors must also consider and anticipate the issues (multiply) marginalized students face. As student-instructors, lines can blur and be uncomfortable to navigate when we negotiate being an ally to students while also taking care of ourselves–further complicated by the invisibility of positionality and privilege. Moreover, in line with policies set by our institutional contexts, we may also be expected to reproduce injustices–such as the ways that racism permeate educational spaces (Moore, 2018)–or act in other harmful ways towards our students. We are, however, simultaneously disempowered to address these harms without opening ourselves up to further risk. Haywood (2019) writes that collaboration should avoid "surveillancing and silencing" (para. 7), and community-based practices require us to think through "how our practices are directly tied to the ethical obligations we hold in leveraging our power and positions to support the folks we desire to collaborate with" (para. 7). Collaboration, then, requires thinking through our relationships to position, privilege, and power as graduate student-instructors in our universities. We must assess our situations and be reflexive as we consider potential harms toward our students and ourselves.

The risks of entering coalition are complicated by our individual identities as well as the in-between student-instructor positionality. Managing the tensions of developing social justice-oriented pedagogies within institutional or departmental expectations of the courses they ask us to teach requires different levels of emotional labor and even harm depending on the student-instructor's lived experiences. For example, a course that expects conversations about language justice or writing experiences might be comfortable for either of us but be very uncomfortable for graduate students with identities both similar and different from ours. Meanwhile, managing the tensions between course expectations and students' own expectations or needs requires us to make decisions that jeopardize care or social justice over institutional requirements–and

vice versa. If I (Alex) highlight specific instances of racism in order to invite reflection, I must do so without commodifying the experiences of my students, thus alienating them, and without being so facile that my classroom fails to foster community or address oppression meaningfully. Though sometimes we make the choice to resist the University à la a "soft" policy or other blurred lines, other times, as our narratives illustrated, students resist us. While I (Nicole) strive to develop syllabi and course reading lists which center diverse authors and rich experiences, a conversation about privilege and its "peculiar benefit[s]" (Gay, 2012, para. 3) might alienate students who feel accused or confuse students with marginalized backgrounds or experiences. Decisions that go into our syllabi or those that we make in conversation during class time might jeopardize our careers after completing our graduate degrees, be it an immediate student report to our supervisors or institution or gradually through anonymous evaluations. How do we simultaneously give our students, both individually and collectively, what they want or need from the course and each class session while ensuring our job security, our safety in the classroom?

Tactically Transgressive Classrooms

In our view, the traditional transactional model of education merely invites students to attend to social justice, providing space to avoid resolving the ways injustice is attendant to our classrooms and places of work. By contrast, a tactically transgressive approach disquiets hierarchies and dominant narratives within the classroom, creating bridges between student and teacher in order to agitate towards social justice together.

Tactical transgression, especially for (multiply) marginalized instructors, calls for caution as well as risk-taking and invitation: we must care for ourselves and ask students to be transgressive with us. Being tactically transgressive distributes power across the coalition, throughout the classroom. Decentralizing the responsibility and acting tactically within and against the frameworks of an institution is crucial, as to act tactically requires moments of discomfort and subverting the narratives of the academy that would appropriate and sanitize social justice towards neoliberal ends. As we explore in our narratives, building coalition is not about prioritizing the comfort of a majority or those who are comfortable in an oppressive status quo but rather developing a classroom that can become a coalitional space.

Thus, we see graduate student-instructors' unique positionality as an opportunity to act for ends beyond the classroom or institution–the "greater good." Ultimately, our goal is to invite those of us still "in process" (Restaino, 2012) and navigate many in-betweens to strive toward a tactically transgressive classroom. Before we might facilitate a classroom that embodies tactical transgression, though, we hope that other graduate student-instructors begin with tactical moments to foster equity in small but meaningful ways.

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