# Redistributing Care Work: Toward Labor Justice for Graduate Student Instructors

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## Introduction

My introduction to graduate school in rhetoric and composition was simultaneously an introduction to the "feminized" (Bartlett, 2003; Holbrook, 1991; Schell, 1992) status of labor in the discipline. At the training for new graduate student instructors (GSIs) in my MA program, a string of university administrators, including our WPA, told us how extremely valuable and important our work in first-year writing was. In a large university, our writing classes stood out as some of the only courses in which students would get individualized attention from teachers. As writing teachers, we had the ability to not only help students develop as writers, we were told, but also support their adjustment to college life. After bestowing us with this enormous responsibility, our department concluded the orientation by showing us how to apply for food stamps. Evidently, the labor we would perform as writing instructors was laudable, but not worthy of a living wage.

As I began teaching first-year writing, I found my days saturated with emotional labor. Students appeared in my office distraught, worried that they had chosen the wrong major or the wrong school. I spent long hours conferencing with students and carefully composing feedback on their writing, hoping to help them gain confidence. Having just started graduate school myself, I wondered, like Crystal Zanders, "How can we be there for our students when we can barely be there for ourselves?" (Day et al., 2021, p. 393). When I entered my PhD program, I found that I was not alone in not knowing how to balance my needs and those of my students. On multiple occasions, I witnessed my peers consoling crying students in our shared office. I listened to a classmate explain how she had fallen behind on her own coursework because she was giving so much time to her students. GSIs at my institution are privileged to only shoulder a one-one teaching load with small class sizes, but it's the *type* of work—care work—we do that makes even this workload unsustainable for many of us.

Feminist compositionists have identified the feminization of composition, or its association with care work, as an underlying cause of poor working conditions for contingent instructors. Despite similarities between GSIs and other contingent faculty, we have largely been left out of this conversation. Most existing scholarship on GSI labor in composition also does not engage with teaching writing as feminized, caring labor. In response, I draw on the insights of feminist writing studies scholarship to theorize GSI labor as care work. After providing a brief overview of care work in writing

1

studies, I explain how GSIs' dual status as students and teachers can increase the amount of care work we perform. Arguing that one method for improving our working conditions lies in reducing the burden of care work on GSIs, I then offer several pedagogical strategies that redistribute care among students: putting students into stable peer groups, centering peer response, and scheduling time for rest. I conclude by briefly discussing the possibilities for such approaches in not only promoting labor justice, but also building sustainable communities of care (currie & Hubrig, 2022; Day et al., 2021).

**Teaching Writing as Care Work**

Due to the historical and ongoing feminization of composition, teaching writing has come to involve caring labor. Feminization refers to the association of composition with "women's work," which scholars trace to the creation of writing programs in the 20th century (Schell, 1992; Strickland, 2001). As Sue Ellen Holbrook (1991) explains, women's work "has a disproportionate number of women workers; it is service-oriented; it pays less than men's work; it is devalued" (p. 202). Although most precariously employed writing instructors do identify as women, the *kind of work* writing teachers do outweighs individual gender in this analysis. Multiple writing studies scholars (O'Donnell, 2019; Robinson, 2021; Schell, 1998) have labeled that work as care work. Heather Robinson (2021) provides a comprehensive definition of care work for writing studies, viewing it as "activities that academic staff undertake to support students' learning, and to support students' and other colleagues' emotional health and academic advancement" (p. 5). While this interpretation of care may encompass all teaching, Robinson differentiates composition as "high-care teaching," requiring "increased administrative expectations" and "'student-centered' learning" (2021, p. 12). Like care work outside of the university, teaching writing is labor-intensive but underpaid and undervalued.

Writing teachers continue to work despite this low pay because teaching writing often feels good. The rush of successfully helping a student improve may convince us to put more time and energy into teaching. Eileen Schell (1998) terms these "emotional rewards … a 'psychic income'" that "keep[s] women invested in teaching" (p. 82). This becomes a problem, as Theresa Evans (2017) explains, when the psychic income justifies writing teachers' low pay. Evans calls this "the myth of self-sacrifice," or "the belief that unpaid or poorly compensated work is acceptable when it serves some greater civic or moral good—even in contexts when taking on such work subjects the worker to extreme hardship" (2017, p. 86). While the un(der)paid care work involved in teaching writing can feel very rewarding, it ultimately contributes to the precarious status of our labor.

Importantly, however, care work does not always require a caring affect. Schell (1998), Rachel O'Donnell (2019), and Robinson (2021) each categorize the teaching of writing as care work regardless of whether it is accompanied by the warm, fuzzy feelings we

2

might commonly associate with care. Indeed, as Ersula Ore (2017) demonstrates, her care for students as a Black woman "is not comfortable" and can in fact appear "downright abrasive" (p. 24). The specific contours of care work vary according to individual instructors' positionalities, with institutional structures calling on women of color to perform more care work for less recognition (O'Donnell, 2019; Robinson, 2021; Schell, 1998). Furthermore, care work in composition has historically and continues to uphold white supremacy (DeLong, 2020; Strickland, 2001) and patriarchy (Schell, 1998). Not only does care work contribute to the exploitation of writing instructors, but it can also—if unintentionally—reproduce systems of oppression. This is the fraught working environment GSIs enter.

**Care Work and GSI Labor**

Following Robinson's (2021) definition of care work as involving all the work writing teachers do to promote academic achievement and wellbeing for our students and coworkers, I argue that GSIs' primary workload consists of care work. The same can be said, of course, for part-time, contingent, and NTT instructors. While I fully agree that GSIs *are* "contingent laborers" (Rieger et al., 2023, p. 74), I believe it is necessary to tease out different roles' distinct positionalities, as these influence the caring labor we perform. Both GSIs and other contingent faculty enact care work by planning engaging lessons, monitoring small-group work, responding to student writing, conferencing, advising students outside of class, making our pedagogy responsive to students' needs, managing our emotions, and mentoring other instructors, and we do so under precarious conditions—a job description that requires working more than contracted, low pay, limited job security, a lack of benefits, and administrative surveillance. What sets GSIs apart, however, is our dual role as students and teachers.

GSIs' student status can obfuscate our role as academic care workers. Many GSIs, especially those newer to graduate school, identify as students first and instructors second (Marburger, 2019). When I first started my MA, I viewed myself as a student taking classes and conducting research who had to teach as part of my program. It took years of graduate school (and joining my grad employee union) to understand the primacy of my teaching labor. After all, the "title of graduate student," as Laura Bartlett (2003) tells us, obscures the fact that "the overwhelming majority of time spent in rhet-comp programs is devoted to pedagogical training and working as feminized contingent labor" (p. 271). If GSIs do not view themselves as workers, they may not account for how much un(der)paid care work they do. This is especially true because care work tends to be difficult to quantify and exceeds our job descriptions. Chatting with students outside of class, for example, may not seem like work, but something we do just because we care about our students. The nebulous nature of care also makes it so that teaching can easily seep into and supersede our other academic obligations. Unlike faculty in teaching-only positions, GSIs teach care-intensive writing courses while taking classes, completing exams, writing dissertations, publishing, and attending conferences. This double workload is especially significant considering Priest's (2018)

3

study, which revealed that GSIs spent most of their time on grading or responding to student writing—a form of care work.

As many GSIs hold out hope for a tenure-track position at the end of our studies, we are further compelled to engage in caring labor by the apprenticeship myth. Described by Allison Laubach Wright (2017), this narrative portrays GSIs "as apprentices who are the primary beneficiaries of their work in the academy" (p. 272). Because GSIs gain teaching experience through our assistantships, the story goes, we should work hard for little pay. Thinking toward securing future employment, we may, like more than half of writing instructors responding to Rieger et al.'s (2023) survey, feel pressured to "engag[e] in service without pay" (p. 90) to earn a line on our CV or impress our WPAs. We might go the extra mile and do "increased 'care work' in order to try to receive excellent course evaluations" (O'Donnell, 2019, p. 21) to stand out from our peers and help us secure a TT position. The problem, of course, is that those jobs are disappearing, such that graduate teaching seems less like an apprenticeship and more like plain contingent labor (Bousquet, 2002; Wright, 2017). However, the staying power of the apprenticeship myth suggests that if we work hard enough—if we do enough extra, un(der)paid care work—we have a shot at one of the good jobs.

Beyond GSIs' own motivations for performing care work, our teacher-student positionality can make our students expect more care from us. Being students, many GSIs lack the authority that other contingent faculty can derive from their degrees. GSIs may be younger, and we tend to be less experienced teachers (Bousquet, 2002; Greene, 2021; Marburger, 2019). These factors can make GSIs seem more accessible than other faculty. When I started teaching writing, I was only 21 and had just received my BA. I told my students that I knew what it felt like to start school, having just done so myself, which led some of them to come to me for advice. More recently, I have had multiple students choose to interview me for a general education assignment because, they told me, I was their most approachable teacher. When students trust us, and when we do genuinely care about them, it can be challenging to limit how *much* we care. As one GSI, "Alex," interviewed in Clem and Buyserie's (2023) study puts it: "[A]s a grad instructor it can be difficult to say no to your own students" (p. 37). Our relative inexperience as teachers and the intense, competitive nature of graduate school may make it feel almost impossible to refuse extra care work.

However, while GSIs' positionality as students intensifies the care work involved in teaching writing, it can also give us power to address this burden. Compared to other contingent faculty, many GSIs have greater job security in the form of "guaranteed funding" for the length of our programs (Greene, 2021, p. 53). As Beth Greene (2021) argues, our student status makes it "safer for us" to "fight for social justice in higher education," because "we're consumers before employees and have larger numbers, potentially giving us a better chance of being heard by administrators" (p. 56). Given many graduate programs' aim of professionalization, GSIs have opportunities to work

with our WPAs. In this way, we can leverage our student-worker status to identify and enact solutions to the exploitation of our caring labor.

**Redistributing Care Work Pedagogically**

I argue that one partial answer lies in teaching strategies that redistribute care work among students. Here, I follow Ritter (2012) in seeking pedagogical solutions to the labor problem in composition. Ritter proposes that "we re-examine our base affection for the highly intimate, labor-intensive pedagogy that has been embraced as the core of first-year writing" (2012, p. 413). By advocating for teaching strategies that make less care work for GSIs, I do not mean to imply that we should stop fighting for fair pay and better benefits. These struggles, often waged via graduate student unions (Marburger, 2019), must continue. However, I believe that our efforts for labor justice have overlooked our caring workload.

There are, of course, barriers to simply doing less care work. Like contingent faculty, GSIs lack autonomy over our teaching, as Bartlett explains: "graduate student labor is further feminized by its subordination to a curriculum designed, theorized, and dictated by the department's composition expert" (2003, p. 272). GSIs experience pressure to adhere to pedagogical "best practices," even when such practices directly contribute to our overwork (Ritter, 2012). My current writing program, for example, has a strict attendance policy that requires me to check in with students who miss class and regularly update WPAs on attendance. While I do not think that GSIs should necessarily have full authority over our teaching—a move which would increase, not decrease, our workload—we should have the ability to design course policies that work better for us.

Perhaps a larger obstacle to redistributing care work pedagogically lies in GSIs' emotional attachment to high-care teaching. If the care-intensive work of teaching writing often feels good, it feels bad to say that we don't want to care as much. However, as feminist compositionists (Evans, 2017; Schell, 1998) remind us, these feelings serve to discipline us and keep us working. I personally address these emotions by reminding myself of the larger structures underlying the outsourcing of care to composition, including institutional and departmental histories and neoliberal austerity policies, as well as the capitalist system that causes both undergraduate and graduate students to face mental health crises, financial strain, and isolation. In the words of feminist theorist Heather Berg (2014): "these debts are not ours" (p. 162-163). Further, remembering that care work can and does uphold white supremacy, we must move away from viewing care as an unqualified good. Ultimately, I console myself with the understanding that the practices I recommend below *redistribute* care, not *eliminate* it. In this way, my classes continue to support students' wellbeing and development as writers, while also better supporting my own wellbeing.

Engaging students in learning how to care for one another as writers and as people is more valuable than having care come solely from us as teachers. While it may seem

ironic to ask first-year students—who face a high level of stress—to care for one another, community-based care has historical roots in marginalized communities as a tactic for weathering and resisting systems of domination (currie, 2022; currie & Hubrig, 2022; Day et al., 2021). Here, I do not intend to equate classroom-based care among students to grassroots care among oppressed groups, but to show that individuals who may appear to have little capacity to care *can* do so in a collective. To provide a starting point for this pedagogical redesign, I offer three strategies I have used to redistribute care in my own teaching. These practices, importantly, are not new; what I add is a framing that allows us to view them as methods for redistributing care work and therefore promoting labor justice for GSIs.

### Put Students in Peer Groups

Multiple teacher-scholars in writing studies (currie, 2022; currie & Hubrig, 2022; Day et al., 2021) have found that putting students in the same groups throughout the semester helps encourage them to support one another, leaving less care work to fall on GSIs. For example, sarah madoka currie places students in teams "to promote camaraderie and to create alternate avenues of support" (currie & Hubrig, 2022, p. 137). Zanders similarly asks students to meet regularly in teams to conduct peer review, complete in-class projects, and "check in with each other" (Day et al., 2021, p. 394). When students have a set of peers whom they know and can easily get in contact with, it makes it more likely that they might ask each other for help, rather than always turning to the teacher. Stable peer groups may also alleviate some of the fear and worry that comes with peer response (currie & Hubrig, 2022, p. 142), creating less emotional labor for GSIs. Ideally, students should receive credit for this community-building work (currie, 2022) so that it replaces, rather than adds to, the work they already do for class.

This semester, I am experimenting with putting students in regular teams for the first time. My students are assigned to groups of four or five, which I use for in-class activities and peer response. I had groupmates exchange contact information on the first day of class so that they could get in touch with each other if they have questions or need assistance. Although it is too soon to tell how these groups will work out, I already spend less time lesson planning and structuring peer response since I don't have to continuously assign students to different groups. Unlike in previous semesters, my current students actually know each other's names because they work with each other every class period. Ultimately, as Zanders explains, we "can't force folks to care, but [we] can make it convenient and natural" (Day et al., 2021, p. 393).

### Center Peer Response

Perhaps the most time-consuming aspect of GSIs' care work is responding to student writing. We can reduce the amount of time and emotional labor we expend on feedback, while still ensuring that students receive valuable commentary on their writing, by

6

"positioning the 'work' of process and review more squarely in the hands of students" (Ritter, 2012, p. 414). While conventional writing studies wisdom holds as sacred the value of instructor feedback, recent research (Melzer, 2020) has demonstrated that students learn as much, if not more, from peer feedback. Centering peer response allows GSIs to de-center our own feedback. Rather than relying only on us for evaluations of their writing and suggestions for revision, students can come to rely on one another.

I have prioritized peer response in varying ways across institutional contexts. My MA institution allowed me a high level of freedom in structuring peer response. Before every major assignment, I distributed a survey to students asking for their preferences on who they wanted feedback from and at what stage in their writing process. Crucially, I imposed limitations on how much feedback I would provide; just as I asked students to share their needs with me, I shared with them that I had a limited capacity to respond to their writing, and that they could help each other through peer response. In practice, this meant that for a writing assignment with three scaffolded steps, students could get feedback from me on one step, and they would do peer response for the other two. My current institution advises a more structured approach to feedback via the "instructor-led peer conference," in which "a teacher meets with a small group of students … to discuss students' drafts" (Ching, 2014, p. 15). While I did not choose this method, I find that it lessens the time I spend on feedback because I prepare a few points for each conference, knowing that students will come prepared with their own feedback. I also give students more responsibility for response by asking them to send our group two to three questions that they would like us to discuss. This way, I spend less time responding while also tailoring my comments to what students find most important.

### Schedule Time for Rest

Finally, I aim to redistribute care in my teaching by building time for rest—for me and for students—into the course. When possible, I create opportunities for students to care for each other so that I can take a step back from providing support. This most commonly looks like workshop days that offer students a dedicated time and space to work on upcoming assignments. Giving students time to work on projects in class is a common pedagogical practice; however, I place a special emphasis on encouraging students to help each other out, which might look like asking a peer to answer a question about the prompt, discuss how to approach the assignment, or read over a portion of a draft. I still assist students, but they learn that they can also turn to each other for help. Occasionally, I also schedule rest by making class asynchronous. Zanders recommends asking students to "meet virtually to complete activities during class time" on their own (Day et al., 2021, p. 393). Assigning students independent work that they can complete online or in groups outside of the classroom allows GSIs to take a breather while students continue learning. Students, however, deserve rest too. When we do peer conferences, students' only responsibility for that week is coming to one conference. I also adopt currie and Hubrig's (2022) practice of pairing regular check-in surveys for

students with "flexible" course documents (p. 133). I leave flex time in my course schedule so that, in the very likely case we as a class decide to take a day or two for rest, students still have enough time to complete the required assignments. Creating time for rest is an act of care, but one that rejects, rather than upholds, the overwork of GSIs.

**Conclusion: Communities of Care**

I have argued for pedagogical revisions that redistribute care work in the classroom as one way of redressing the large share of undervalued, underpaid, and emotionally taxing care work that GSIs perform. These teaching practices, however, form a necessary but not sufficient component of labor justice for GSIs. If we truly want to move away from viewing "first-year composition as *the* site of maternal-ethical student care" (Ritter, 2012, p. 413), we will need structural change. At the very least, writing programs must seriously reassess policies that compel an excessive amount of care work from GSIs, including but not limited to requiring frequent and copious feedback on student writing, additional administrative work like repeatedly inputting student data and participating in program assessment (O'Donnell, 2019; Robinson, 2021), and the unpaid peer mentoring often involved in pedagogical training. Although some of the pedagogical changes I have advocated for cannot be standardized, given that they require collaboration between instructors and students (currie & Hubrig, 2022, p. 144), WPAs can give GSIs the freedom to experiment. In the end, reduced care work will only result in labor justice for GSIs when paired with fair compensation, a change we must also advocate for at the institutional level.

While we struggle toward that goal, pedagogies that redistribute care work have the benefit of creating "communities of care" (Day et al., 2021, p. 390). Drawing on disability justice and trauma-informed frameworks, the concept of community care "prioritizes collective care and wellbeing" (currie & Hubrig, 2022, p. 133) and "privileges people over institutions" (Day et al., 2021, p. 390). Rather than viewing care as unidirectional, flowing only from teachers to students, communities of care proliferate reciprocal care for both students and teachers (Day et al., 2021). This model of care can also lessen the intensified extraction of care work from multiply marginalized GSIs, as caring becomes everyone's responsibility. Although I do not yet think I can call my classroom a genuine community of care, I am hopeful that my students will take on some of the care work that makes our class happen. Communities of care can not only forward labor justice for GSIs, but support all of us in living through the multiple, overlapping crises of contemporary capitalism as we advocate for a better university.

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