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Tracing Trajectories

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Introduction

"While the state of graduate labor in our field may be dire, we see addressing these concerns as commensurate with and a central part of our scholarship and professional identities" (Bowman & Kovanen, 2020, p. 3).

When returning to our first publication, we were struck by our clarity of vision and what we saw as the work of the field. Our call, both then and now, is tied deeply to our story of becoming organizers and academics. In that initial *Xchanges* publication, included as part of the Symposium on the Status of Graduate Study in Rhetoric and Composition, we focused our organizing call on fellow graduate workers. We saw this group as among the most precarious within the academy, and we saw how our own work with a graduate worker union, the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) Local 6300, had led to material improvements to our working conditions on campus. We wanted to encourage other workers to engage in similar struggles, as we had seen fellow graduate students in the field do in response to a series of racist and sexist posts on the WPA-L through the creation of the NextGen listserv (Baniya et al., 2021; Kumari et al., 2020) and the related #WPAListservFeministRevolution on the social media platform then known as Twitter (Olejnik & Messina, 2020). Prior to the composition of that article, we had both presented a few times at Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) but had not experienced writing for academic publication. As we moved towards PhD candidacy, we saw the *Xchanges* call as an opportunity to both gain experience in publication and synthesize our emergent expertise from our reading of exam lists and experiences as organizers in the union. This convergence prompted sustained inquiry into the relationship between academic theory and material practice: how might the conceptual frameworks encountered in our scholarly reading inform, and be informed by, the situated realities of labor organizing?

As we've moved into our careers, the level of precarity across the academy has only grown, and organizing academic workers broadly remains a central theme for us because the rate of de-professionalization has only increased. These changes have ushered in what Adrianna Kezar, Tom DePaola, and Daniel Scott (2019) call the "gig academy," a university transformed into a "patchwork of loosely connected contingent workforces to service both its central missions and its day-to-day operations" (p. 36). Spurred on by transformations in artificial intelligence, increasingly hostile federal education policies, and burgeoning corporate models of academic administration that diminish instructional autonomy (Eaton, 2022; Heller, 2016; Rhoades, 2025), academic workers across rank and classification are increasingly precarious. These events only further accelerate the negative shifts observed by Kezar et. al. (2019). While our academic future may look bleak, appeals to the halcyon days of yore–like referencing

decades-past percentages of tenure-line faculty–point to an uncomplicated picture of the academy that is almost entirely fictive (Graff, 2024), rife with its own problems of white racial hegemony (Wilder, 2013). Instead, we must chart a new path, because, if academics do not begin organizing soon, academia as we know it will simply cease to exist.

Now working as a tenure-track professor (Bruce) and a full-time labor organizer (Andy), our reflections will trace our professional trajectories across academia and organizing, arguing for their importance to maintain higher education as a public good. Our 2020 paper in *Xchanges* was our first peer-reviewed publication, and we used that entrance into academic conversation to highlight the continued importance of organizing, both as a historical antecedent in Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies (Robertson et al., 1987; Sledd, 1991; Wyche, 2017) and based on our own experience as budding labor organizers having recently won a strong collective bargaining agreement after a grueling twelve-day strike (Johnson, 2018) with our union, the GEO. We ended that publication by calling for a renewed focus on the connection between our academic work and our working conditions. This piece and the life histories detailed within provide one framework for noticing the entanglement of these two interests and how they might inform labor organizing efforts across campuses. We see the current struggles of the American academy not as insurmountable obstacles or as an individual mission to solve, but as collective problems that require collective solutions. Organizing and working together within and across our universities can lead us to solutions we would not have discovered or accomplished alone.

In this paper, we trace our diverging but complimentary paths through the academy, demonstrating how academic research can and should live beyond the page (like on the picket line)! Since our *Xchanges* publication in 2020, we have continued to work together as elected leaders in our union and together in our field as researchers and writers (Bowman et al., 2022; Bowman & Kovanen, 2020; Diab et al., 2025; Kovanen & Bowman, 2021, 2024). While we continue to work together, we have each chosen to focus on different aspects of our overarching academic project. For Bruce, this aspect is research, teaching, and service. Joining the tenure-track faculty of North Dakota State University in the fall of 2024, Bruce dove head-first into scholarship, serving as an editor for two academic journals (Academic Labor: Research and Artistry and Literate Activity: Perspectives on Textual Practices in the World), taking on graduate student advisees, directing the upper division writing program, and serving as the chair of the CCCC Labor Caucus. While his co-author often accuses him of overworking himself, the academy would not exist without the labor of Bruce and many scholars like him. While Andy decided to leave the traditional academic career behind, he did not stray far from campus. Andy currently works as the Lead Staff Organizer for the Campus Faculty Association (CFA), an organizing committee working to unionize the tenure-track faculty at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). UIUC professors are the last faculty at a public university in Illinois to unionize, and their campaign points to the broader turn towards organizing tenure-line faculty at R1 US universities (e.g., Michigan State University's Union of Tenure System Faculty and the Penn State Faculty Alliance), who now join other long-established and growing unions of graduate workers,

non-tenure-line faculty, post-docs, building and food service workers, librarians, and administrative staff (Herbert et al., 2020). While Bruce's work may be more legible to our readers than Andy's, we write this piece in part to argue for a more expansive understanding of what "academic work" means, and to argue for a greater focus on what heretofore has often been labeled as "extracurricular" interests. If academics do not attend to their working conditions soon their work and workplaces will be unrecognizable.

Becoming Academic Organizers

The way to change the field is to organize. We see organizing as a concerted activity in service of material change, a way for people to come together to solve problems–broadly defined–collectively. We have both drawn on the notion of "spadework," a term coined in the 1960s by key civil rights figure Ella Baker to describe the organizing efforts of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) (Ransby, 2003). Spadework, described as "the complex, often unseen, and politically fraught work of cultivating everyday grassroots empowerment and resistance," (Inwood & Alderman, 2022, p. 3723) offers a useful framework for understanding the overlooked or so-called "mundane" aspects of organizing–building relationships and networks of power–rather than only focus on glossy highlights of "action" like protests, strikes, and picket lines. While spadework is not a term often heard in the academy, service is. Too often, we valorize the specific measurable outputs of academic work: publications, presentations, grants, and so on. Aligning with those who have made similar arguments about the value given to certain kinds of work over others in the academy (Kahn, 2020; Lynch-Biniek & Cox, 2024; Novotny, 2025) we too advocate for more expansive definitions of what can and should count. Often on academic picket lines we hear the call, "Our working conditions are our students' learning conditions." Carrying this call into our scholarship and teaching, we return to our initial *Xchanges* publication to deepen our call to academic laborers of all stripes to organize their campuses and disciplines in defense of academic life, in which we emphasize instructional autonomy, research independence, and student-centered campuses. We share our stories of becoming to help illustrate the entanglement of academic work and labor activism and to show how treating these aspects as separate spheres–similar to the denigration of teaching and service work over research–weakens both our universities and our scholarship.

Bruce

My trajectory from a PhD in writing studies to a tenure-line faculty position reflects an uneven and recursive process across labor advocacy and academic scholarship. After going on strike in 2018, I moved from bargaining team member and grievance chair to co-president of the union. As co-president, I was immediately struck by: 1) The overwhelming variety of texts drafted, circulated, and read by union members and 2) The fact that many previous co-presidents had elected not to finish their doctoral degrees and instead work in labor organizing. As my participation in the labor movement deepened (soon after becoming a Vice President of the Illinois Federation of

Teachers [IFT] and serving on the American Federation of Teachers [AFT] Higher Education Program and Policy Council), I began to think about how my dissertation, grounded in the study of literate activity, could be used to examine the literate practices of rank-and-file union members. Defined "as cultural forms of life saturated with textuality, that is strongly motivated and mediated by texts," (Prior, 1998, p. 138) literate activity served as a frame for my understanding of how union members came to learn how to compose, circulate, and use texts. This choice for my dissertation was deliberate: to me, it meant that I could continue exploring questions I had encountered as an elected union leader from the perspective of research. This combination blurred the line between conventional divisions between scholarship and service, intellectual and political labor. From my perspective, organizing sharpened my sense of what writing does in the world.

Taking the supposed "traditional" step for me meant focusing on the academic job market as I neared the end of my degree. Entering the 2022-23 academic job market, I encountered the structural constraints many scholars now face: a shrinking number of tenure-track positions, heightened competition, and institutional retrenchment. Put simply: I was not successful in securing a position that year. This moment served as an inflection point for me: try again or find work as an organizer. After conversations with mentors (both at UIUC and IFT), I took up a postdoctoral position with the research team I had been employed with as a graduate student and tried again. When I entered the market a second time, I focused on demonstrating how my scholarship on literate activity in labor contexts can inform pedagogical approaches, particularly in teaching writing as a tool for collective action. At the same time, I could point to my work in the union as evidence of the stakes and broader applicability of that work. This alignment proved critical in securing a position at North Dakota State University, whose job ad specifically called for research and teaching that foregrounded social justice.

What remains most significant across this trajectory is the refusal of a strict hierarchy between studying labor and participating in it. My academic work is sharpened by organizing because it helps me maintain a focus on writing as a sociomaterial practice. In turn, my organizing is strengthened by my research because it brings a set of analytic tools for understanding how texts circulate within complex genre systems like unions. Academic research should not remain passive; rather, I see my work as insights already embedded in ongoing collective efforts. Here, I am reminded of an undated pamphlet distributed by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) I found in the Walter P. Reuther Digital Archive at Wayne State University. It begins: "Knowledge, like energy, is power only when it is put to work to get good results" (Uncredited, Undated). This quote serves as a frame for how I approach my own work in the academy.

Andy

Andy's trajectory away from the tenure-track and towards full-time organizing work cannot be understood as a simple departure from one profession to another; rather, it reflects a gradual reorientation of my intellectual and political commitments that often felt in conflict while still in graduate school. This tension can best be seen in comments

my PhD advisor made as I worked to both finish coursework and bargain a contract. While the exact quote is lost to memory, I still remember the lament at my lack of focus. I saw my organizing work as directly connected to both my teaching and scholarship. Caring about the working conditions of my colleagues was in my mind what should be focused on. While much of my early professionalization took a familiar path: graduate coursework, participation in scholarly conferences, publication in peer-reviewed journals, and the cultivation of a research agenda legible to a disciplinary audience, this work ran in parallel to my role fighting for better working conditions for my colleagues.

It was within this context that organizing work began to function not as an extracurricular activity but as a parallel site of intellectual and political engagement. Initially, this involvement may have appeared supplementary–serving as a shop steward for my department, helping to envision organizing campaigns, recruiting future leaders to replace me–but over time, organizing came to offer an alternative framework for understanding both my purpose and the best practices of knowledge production. Where academic work often emphasizes individual authorship, specialization, and professional distinction, organizing foregrounds collective action, generalization, and the translation of complex ideas into actional demands. Perhaps surprisingly, my academic training also prepared me well for work as an organizer.

As I continued to organize, I began to question the implicit hierarchy that positions academic scholarship as the primary locus of knowledge production. I love research, and I still participate in the academic conversation despite leaving academia behind, but I came to realize that if I wanted to build the academy my co-author and I often imagined on the page, I would need to do that building work off the page. Likewise, while I learned much from reading the advice and expertise of other scholars, I've also learned a lot from my time at the bargaining table and having organizing conversations with my colleagues. By organizing, I encountered forms of knowledge that were both rigorously developed and immediately consequential: strategies for mobilization, analyses of institutional behavior, and practices of coalition-building that required continual adaptation and reflection. Crucially, these forms of knowledge were not ancillary to intellectual life but constituted a mode of theorizing grounded in practice.

As my time in graduate school came to a close, I needed to make a choice. I could finish my dissertation and begin the rigorous process of securing academic employment, or I could take the unexpected path. I had dreamed of being a college professor since age eight, but a new dream was taking shape. The faculty at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign had begun to discuss unionization. I realized I had the skills and expertise necessary to help make the faculty's dream a concrete reality.

Ultimately, my trajectory underscores the permeability of the boundary between academic and organizing labor, showing that the distinction is less a matter of inherent differences in intellectual rigor than of institutional context and orientation. By moving toward full-time organizing, I continue to participate in the work of broadly reimagining where and how knowledge is produced, validated, and valorized. This reimagining

challenges the primacy of the academy, the central site of intellectual life, instead positioning organizing spaces as generative environments in which theory and practice are continually co-constituted. In this sense, the transition is not simply a departure from academia but an expansion of what counts as scholarly work, one that values organizing and intellectual labor equally within the ongoing project of collective transformation and revitalization of higher education.

As you can see from our stories above, academic and organizing work are inherently tied together, just as we have continued to be in our work. Like the helical structure of a DNA strand, our stories of becoming represent different contexts, outcomes, and emphases joining together into one vision of academic and professional life. Put more simply, we could not do this work without each other, nor would we wish to. We argue that such an expansive vision of academic life is the only way forward for academia as a whole.

In 2020, we ended our symposium article advocating for organizing as a practice, writing:

> We must build on the work of labor activists in the field and begin to address exploitation by organizing in our own departments, universities, and fields. Small actions, when done collectively, can have ripple effects across our field. Exchanges such as this symposium lay the groundwork for the sustained organizing that can change our field" (Bowman & Kovanen, 2020, p. 5).

As we return to our publication years later, we see how our call was far too narrow. While we maintain that collective action is the path forward, who we see as centrally involved in that work has expanded: we need everyone; everyone needs to be a labor organizer. Further, we argue now that such labor activism is not an ancillary offshoot of one's professional life but rather a vital aspect to creating an expansive vision of what academia can be and should become.

Conclusion

In tracing our trajectories through and alongside the academy, we have argued that the relationship between academic work and labor organizing is not incidental but constitutive. *Xchanges* served as a vital avenue for developing that perspective on writing and organizing. The unique affordances of *Xchanges* as a publication specifically for graduate students offered us an opportunity to work with scholars in our field, helping us hone our argument and develop a research trajectory that continues on and through this piece. In both process and product, our *Xchanges* publication laid the foundation for our future careers. By writing in a venue that not only facilitates early-career publication but also demystifies the often opaque and occluded genres (Swales, 1996) that inform the academic writing process, we were enculturated into that process in a way that taught us to account for reviews and editorial commentary in ways that both satisfy disciplinary expectations and preserved our authorial intent. Writing that initial submission to *Xchanges* reframed publication not as a singular outcome but as an iterative, dialogic practice embedded within broader networks of scholarly exchange. Simply put, *Xchanges* is where we developed our academic voices.

If this article (and the *Xchanges* one before it) make one intervention, it is to challenge readers to reconsider the boundaries that have long structured our understanding of scholarly life: boundaries between research, teaching, and service; intellectual and political labor; individual achievement and collective action. These distinctions, while institutionally reinforced, obscure the degree to which academic work is always already embedded in systems of power. What follows from this recognition is not–we hope–simply a shift in perspective, but also a set of practical reorientations for how academic workers might approach their labor moving forward.

Research, Teaching, and Service Reexamined

While there are many ways of dividing up academic work, we end this piece by offering some practical advice using the classic tripartite division of research, teaching, and service.

First, rather than positioning scholarship as analytically detached from the conditions of its production, our work suggests political and ethical investment in the problems and solutions research identifies deepens its value. Importantly, this orientation also pushes against the individualizing tendencies of academic research. Collaborative writing, co-authorship, and collective theorizing are not just methodological choices but epistemological commitments that improve the quality of the academic inquiry. Writing together makes us better scholars!

Second, teaching is why we're here. While research is often held up as the primary work of a tenured professor at many academic institutions, we argue for the valorization of teaching (and service) as co-equal constituents of a well-lived academic life. Teaching, like organizing, is inherently collaborative, giving us the space to build the communities and coalitions that will help us imagine collaborative paths forward for universities and their workers. From this perspective, teaching becomes less about cultivating isolated expertise and more about fostering an awareness of interdependence, how one's work is shaped by, and contributes to, broader systems of power.

Third, service doesn't have to come last, and when it's centered, your view of your workplace and your co-workers can massively improve. We argue that faculty must challenge the marginalization of labor-related work within institutional structures. Service can be reframed as a domain where faculty apply their expertise to shape institution conditions, rather than an inert category for work that doesn't fit elsewhere.

Underlying all these points is a more fundamental claim: that working conditions are inseparable from learning conditions. The quality of education that institutions provide is directly tied to the stability, support, and autonomy afforded to those who teach and research within them. Faculty therefore have both a professional and ethical stake in advocating for equitable labor conditions across rank and classification.

Finally, we return to the premise at the center of all our work: collective problems demand collective solutions. While the scale of the challenges facing higher education can feel overwhelming, our experiences suggest that change often begins with small, coordinated actions. In light of the recent de-chartering of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), we have seen many in our field step up to begin to organize a new path forward, creating regional networks for ideation and new online communities across social media and email listservs. (This is the exact kind of spadework we see as necessary for academic labor!) These actions, when sustained and connected, have the potential to reshape our academic institutions in meaningful ways. To adopt these orientations is not to abandon the core commitments of academic life but to extend them. It is to recognize that knowledge production does not occur in isolation from the conditions under which it is produced, and that faculty have a role to play in shaping those conditions. If the academy is to remain a site of critical inquiry and public good, it will require not only research and teaching, but organizing–the ongoing work of building, sustaining, and transforming the institutions we inhabit.

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