

PROGRAM PROFILE 7.

HOLISTIC MENTORING TO ADVOCATE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that graduate teaching assistants straddle multiple worlds, and this straddling results in significant precarity due in part to the amorphous professional identity of inhabiting both student and instructor roles simultaneously. At the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), a cohort of four doctoral students worked in partnership with a faculty mentor to teach a lower-division, core curriculum course, Technical Writing, in both synchronous and asynchronous delivery formats. A pilot initiative in holistic mentoring addressed not only the challenges of online teaching, but also explored strategies for facilitating social justice aims in teaching. To nurture opportunities for expressing that professional identity to embodied aims of equity, this pilot initiative addressed four facets of holistic mentoring: (a) psychological and emotional support; (b) goal setting and career path development; (c) academic subject knowledge support; and (d) provision of a role model (Nora and Crisp). This profile begins with a brief overview of course goals, department context, and challenges faced by doctoral instructors in teaching course content, including quantitative literacy. Next, instructors discuss the success in and barriers to performing a professional identity as course instructor, sharing their experiences in achieving the goals and delivering the content of the course, even as they collaborate to update the curriculum with inclusive, anti-racist pedagogies. These collaborative discussions underscore an organic-yet-structured model for the holistic mentoring. Lastly, this article concludes with lessons learned, emphasizing the avenues for growth and improvement and the importance of solidarity and rapport as a community of learners (and colleagues).

TEACHING TECHNICAL WRITING AT UTSA

English 2413, Technical Writing (TW), is a lower-division, core curriculum course that enrolls students from across the university. For many, the course is required of their degree plans, while for others, it demonstrates additional, advanced writing

expertise, a crucial skill. This course contributes to the English major with a concentration in Professional Writing, Minor in Professional Writing, and an undergraduate certificate in Professional Writing and Rhetoric. Offered by the English department, this course is usually taught by doctoral instructors as composition courses are provided by a separate department. TW prioritizes opportunities for technical and professional communication skills for a variety of audiences, contexts, purposes, mediums, and technologies, with particular attention to future career applicability. A value-added emphasis involves quantitative literacy and data visualization, connected with the course's "Q" designation, part of a university-wide initiative, developed in response to the university's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). The doctoral instructors, who begin teaching TW in their second year of their program, teach two sections of 25 students each semester. About 30 sections of TW are offered annually. Doctoral instructors, crucial for the success of TW, teach the course content, using previously generated content, resources, and a shared textbook for a common syllabus, which is updated annually. Writing assignments are scaffolded, beginning with the memo and brochure/infographic, followed by an eight-week long recommendation report, built from smaller assignments, including proposal, data and research summary, draft, visual representations of data, and oral presentation. These assignments encourage students to write to their primary and secondary stakeholder audiences, thus shaping their planning, research and content development, delivery, peer critique, and feedback.

HOLISTIC MENTORING

Holistic mentoring prioritizes adequate academic, professional, and social support for doctoral instructors. In the past, those teaching TW for the first time were given access to the course repository for materials and usually relied on informal knowledge networks, along with the advice of more advanced doctoral instructors. This cohort benefited from the robust tools of virtual meetings to engage in regular mentoring and debriefing meetings throughout the Fall 2020 semester. These meetings filled in any gaps, as not all doctoral instructors brought experience in teaching TW or online delivery. During biweekly meetings on Zoom, the department's undergraduate advisor of record facilitated discussions with doctoral instructors, who supported and mentored each other. Each meeting addressed three areas of concern: course content, logistics of teaching, including problem solving, and professionalization. In addition to supporting instructors in adjusting and thriving as professionals, this pilot program benefited from research on holistic mentoring that prioritized the latent variables of educational goal setting, emotional and psychological support, and academic subject knowledge.

Holistic mentoring meetings frequently addressed questions in four areas: (a) using learning management software, Blackboard, such as the logistics of constructing and delivering a completely online class, navigating this platform, using rubrics, giving feedback, navigating breakout rooms, and organizing the gradebook; (b) course management, such as developing a clear schedule, providing students with useful reminders (instead of overwhelming them), using announcements to keep students on track, whether students should be required to turn on their cameras to participate in class discussion, as well as when to record a lecture session; (c) writing pedagogy, such as processes of drafting and revising, engaging in a range of research processes, generating discussion on writing topics and process, and encouraging students to build their reports systematically through the smaller assignments; and (d) handling the paper load, such as time management, turnaround time for assignments (quizzes, discussion, and formal assignments), using rubrics to evaluate student work, and types of feedback to address higher order concerns (content, critical thinking, and organization) and lower order concerns (sentence-level editing and grammar).

Two other challenges remain unique to the course content. The first challenge involves the course's explicit emphasis on quantitative literacy, which was new to the doctoral cohort. To address quantitative literacy, doctoral instructors needed to teach about quantitative information, the development of a body of data, terminology and conventions for working with numbers, their use in an argument or as evidence, and strategies for integrating quantitative information into different types of technical documents. More importantly, instructors had to learn to explain why knowledge, analysis, and generation of quantitative data was important to students' technical writing skills. To do so, instructors developed assignment prompts to facilitate discussion on what quantitative information is, how to read, understand, and analyze qualitative information, how numbers can be manipulated to push a certain agenda, and why collecting, developing, and presenting data is connected to ethical, academic honesty. While the course textbook, *Persuading with Numbers*, offers a helpful foundation, teaching quantitative literacy prompted additional pedagogical demands for doctoral instructors (Hum). Fortunately, the cohort had created a strong, supportive, and collaborative community, and each member generously shared strategies, resources, and even their own recorded course videos through a shared folder. Materials generated to address student questions were also made available, thus the instructors were able to anticipate areas of student confusion.

The second challenge arose in response to social movements, including Black Lives Matter and Me Too, and university-wide initiatives that demanded an emphasis on discussions of diversity and inclusion. To bring attention to the importance of equity, the infographic assignment, given early in the semester,

took on explicit questions both in terms of content and discussion of equity. Coupled with more polarized national debates from the Fall 2020 presidential election cycle, the cohort found themselves navigating similar extreme viewpoints in students' discussions. The infographic assignment, discussed in detail below, was augmented with some examples related to anti-racist topics, such as race and incarceration. Bringing in their own examples, the students in TW were asked to discuss how the design elements of infographics collected, presented, and circulated information about issues related to diversity and inclusion. In addition, students also wrote and designed their own visuals, receiving feedback on strategies that helped them integrate diversity and equity in their literacy choices. Some students appreciated the value of directly connecting such issues to the field of technical writing and the workplace, while others were skeptical and suspicious. Collective meetings for mentorship, separate individual meetings, cohort support, and numerous emails addressed the complications from doctoral instructors' efforts to maneuver these difficult conversations while also representing the institution as responsible, ethical professionals.

MENTORING FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Part of developing a professional identity is not only the performance of an instructor's responsibilities but also learning to teach students how to engage in higher order thinking skills, particularly knowledge construction. The infographic assignment, the second in a series of eight, asks students to create an original infographic, using information from a white paper published by the PEW Research Center. Students are asked to convey information, using a combination of words and images for a specific audience, purpose, context, and rhetorical situation. After selecting a PEW white paper on a social issue, they read and summarized the information, and then integrated that information into an original infographic, paying attention to design and layout, such as words, colors, composition, and visuals (Kim). Students also developed their own visuals from the data, a preliminary step on learning about data visualization that will be reprised in the recommendation report assignment. Existing teaching resources had been revised to address topics of race and inclusivity, as well as including race-related iconography and design ("Depicting"). In addition to class lectures that address race and inclusivity, students engage in discussion by sharing infographics, identifying two to three design strategies, evaluating their successes, and offering ideas or suggestions on how design choices can challenge racism. Thus, this infographic assignment not only introduces students to quantitative literacy but also encourages students to reflect on anti-racism and social issues as they learn to move beyond summary and paraphrase and begin engaging in

knowledge construction through analysis. Knowing that some students might feel called out and defensive, doctoral instructors invited students to participate and contribute to anti-racist efforts. In addition to content changes, the doctoral instructors hoped students would engage critically with each other's perspectives and racial experiences, even as they acknowledged their own positionality. However, through this pilot initiative that the doctoral instructors embraced—learning to facilitate difficult conversations with students to support a social justice agenda, thus responding to disciplinary calls for developing anti-racist pedagogy (Condon and Young)—resulted in polarization and resistance to anti-racist readings, potentially exacerbated by online instruction.

While instructors experienced a broad range of student responses to this anti-racist approach, one doctoral instructor had to maneuver the interpersonal dynamics of a vocal protester, thus spotlighting the challenges of integrating anti-racist pedagogy in the TW curriculum. In response to many students' agreement that inclusivity was relevant to iconography and design, a student expressed his view that further discussions on race would divide the country, concluding that such discussions should be avoided and ignored. While the class proceeded to work on their assignment, the instructor rightly anticipated continued resistance from that one student, who voiced strong views, complaining that gender differences vilified and victimized men. The instructor faced a dilemma with how to deal with this kind of pushback to the anti-racist teachings. In such complex situations, doctoral students' precarity and their in-between status as both instructor and graduate student becomes most obvious. While some scholarship exists on how to handle difficult yet constructive conversations, the unique circumstances of this situation points to the value of a faculty mentor and a strong support community that listened, offered advice, and helped this instructor brainstorm tactics and maneuver pathways for addressing a student's perspective. Furthermore, other students communicated with the instructor to refute that student's protests and defensiveness, although they chose not to engage him on the discussion board. Recognizing the importance of openness, respect, and professionalism, the instructor maintained what Romeo García and Y. Isaac Hinojosa call "strategic neutrality," a stance that acknowledges the ways in which friction becomes an opportunity for cross-racial dialogue. In short, holistic mentoring supported this instructor through the thorny challenges of and difficult conversations rooted in race-related content and aims.

LESSONS LEARNED

Technical Writing remains a generative environment for confronting issues that are related to social justice in a creative fashion. Even during the height of the

COVID-19 pandemic and the limitations of online instruction, the doctoral instructors were able to navigate a number of complicated situations that importantly addressed issues of race, perception, and reality. While doctoral instructors approached the unusual semester with their own commitment to compassion and fairness, the open line of communication between the entire cohort and their mentor facilitated a well-rounded professionalism, imbued with social justice goals. Ultimately, the doctoral students strengthened their appreciation for and investment in difference together in the context of holistic mentoring. This diverse cohort, modulated by an experienced and open-minded mentor, served as an inspirational model for the educational possibilities within their own diverse classrooms.

As the doctoral instructors revisit the infographic assignment and seek to extend anti-racist pedagogy to other portions of the Technical Writing course, they must (re)commit to the belief that the classroom remains a site capable of sparking a revolution or reproducing structural inequities. Despite mixed success, and despite the vocal protests of a few students, the doctoral instructors recognize that the next generation of students benefits from their commitment and efforts to social justice aims. Anti-racist pedagogy is forged by friction and resistance, but the stressors that come from thinking, acting, teaching, and theorizing are worth the risk with the support, partnership, and professional identity enabled by holistic mentoring.

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