

Citizen instructors: Academic citizenship, graduate student instructors, and COVID-19

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Abstract

Academic citizenship entails seeing the academic community as worthy of love beyond what might prove useful for an annual performance review, even amidst a pandemic. The academic community must deserve what Harry Broudy called ‘enlightened cherishing’. Through a qualitative longitudinal study of graduate student instructors (GSIs) at a U.S. public university during the recent pandemic (2020-2022), involving multiple interviews and focus groups, we discovered that the GSIs remained academic citizens during emergency remote teaching necessitated by COVID-19 by adopting the notion of hustle. They were motivated to act with intensified resourcefulness and creativity because of a future-orientation in which a better tomorrow for the community was envisioned. They found more resources than those provided by their university, embraced flexibility, and recognized their students not just as students but as fellow human beings. The academic community, as opposed to the official institution, remained worthy of ‘enlightened cherishing’ because individuals within it could continually show flexibility and empathy in difficult times. To support this hustle, without it leading to burnout, we recommend that academic institutions foster, as an important part of academic citizenship, the virtue of misericordia, which Alasdair MacIntyre calls ‘grief or sorrow over someone else’s distress’—here for students caught up in tragedy.

Key words: academic citizenship; COVID-19; distance education; graduate/postgraduate education; Neo-Aristotelianism

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Introduction

Nicholas Burbules’s (1990) suggestion that educators should be aware of ‘the impediments to success, the prospects for failure, and the limits to our effort’ (p. 471) seems obvious during uncertain times. Burbules, though, claims that educational trade-offs are inevitable. Every canon excludes; every assessment

narrows the curriculum. Tragedy is ‘the nature of things in education’ (Burbules, 1990, p. 473). Tragedy also would seem to be true of academic citizenship, as it posits engagement without obvious extrinsic rewards, such as the mentoring of graduate student instructors or teaching undergraduates beyond what is required, against activities that promise recognition, like the faculty member’s or graduate student’s own research. Burbules’s counsel for teaching in uncertain times is to cultivate the sense that students and teachers are in this together and must do what they can in mutuality and reciprocity, even as dreams of social transformation and the beautiful abstraction of single methods are abandoned. But what prevents academic citizenship from disappearing amidst scarcity and crisis as solidarity dissolves into competitive individualism? Teaching in a pandemic might go on; mentoring graduate student instructors might vanish. The COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to discover what might survive of academic citizenship *in extremis*, so that those virtues and practices can be fostered by institutions in both emergencies and future returns to normalcy.

In our time of academic capitalism, Nicola J. Beatson et al. (2022) propose not only realigning incentives but also ‘socializing faculty to an *ethos* of academic citizenship’ (p. 722) through senior faculty acting as role models. Drawing on the work of Harry Broudy, Andrew Peterson (2021) has suggested academic citizenship be rooted in love, defined as an ‘enlightened cherishing’ that prompts faculty members to care for members of the community and the community itself (p. 67). But these proposals may tend towards circular reasoning. As the aforementioned Broudy (1972) would argue, any successful exemplar must first be able to reshape our aesthetic judgments, and likewise, any ‘enlightened cherishing’ is based on the perception of a dramatic structure in what otherwise would appear insignificant. How might participants in an academic community see the community as attractive *in itself*, worthy of love beyond what proves useful for an annual performance review, even amidst loss in the wake of a pandemic? What is its drama?

Graduate student instructors amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

To figure out the possibilities of a dramatic structure, our research team embarked on a longitudinal study in which we followed 15 graduate student instructors (GSIs) in a large U.S. public university from the Spring of 2020 to the Summer of 2022 by conducting 4 separate hour-long semi-structured interviews and one focus group with each GSI. The following reflections are based on transcribed interviews and focus group sessions.

What is the significance of this research for academic citizenship? The GSIs were good academic citizens, remaining dedicated teachers and colleagues even as they all mentioned loss. The loss included activities that could no longer take place (e.g., tutoring experiences, field trips, and longer discussions in classes now only scheduled for 30 minutes), and an awareness of trade-offs, as the necessity of being online showed the limits of online learning, especially for discussions on sensitive subjects like anti-racism or the experience of teaching, as one GSI said, ‘authentic students in authentic classrooms’. In the initial round of interviews, only one GSI did not mention loss. None of them gave up on teaching, however. All retained their roles as teachers and maintained academic goals. Even one instructor, who spoke of perhaps assuming another role—‘class therapist’, mentioned the ‘right amount’ of such a role, emphasizing they told students, ‘I need you to turn in something’. In every class, students had to turn in assignments.

Further, the GSIs did this even though none of them mentioned extrinsic rewards, whether financial or career advancement. Even if graduate education is a transitional phase, the GSIs were not teaching well as a form of strategic management to advance to the next step in academia. While others in similar positions may react to perceived exploitation or job threat by repositioning their work, these GSIs appeared to have seen instruction as a practice directed to an *internal* good realized in the course of trying to teach well (MacIntyre, 1984).

Hustle as dramatic structure

How was this possible? We suggest that the GSIs perceived a ‘dramatic structure’ (Broudy, 1972) in what they were doing during 2020. This structure can be best described as a *hustle*. As opposed to other, more pejorative uses of the term, we mean they were motivated to act with intensified resourcefulness and creativity because of a future-orientation in which a better tomorrow for the community was envisioned—if hardly guaranteed. Thus, as an article on artists in Ghana during the pandemic is titled, ‘The show must go on’ (Langevang et al., 2022). As Ana Alacovska (2019) has written, the hope that characterizes hustle is an existential stance that leads not to passivity, but a practice directed towards surviving no matter the precarity, not only as individuals but also within relationships of mutuality and reciprocity. The dramatic structure is therefore distinguished by a horizon of collective possibility.

For the GSIs, this underlying dramatic structure grounded three aspects of practice. First, the GSIs did not depend on institutional support, which they considered as overly general and in the form of an unmanageable number of emails.

Instead, they drew on a number of resources, including both their own professional judgment, sometimes developed from the resourcefulness required to have taught at the K-12 level, and informal resources ranging from the relational infrastructure represented by a graduate student seminar to ‘Academic Twitter’ (Byrne et al., 2021; Gannon et al., 2021; Hogan et al., 2022).

Second, they embraced a bounded flexibility. In a focus group, one instructor said that an academic on Twitter had discussed making the pandemic ‘as equitable as possible for students’, which convinced them to adopt a position of being ‘flexible’, including preventing students from receiving a ‘grade lower than what they had before things closed’. This was not because they had abandoned instruction or grading, but because they did not ‘want to grade students just based on these things that are out of their control’. Importantly, this flexibility was a communal and reciprocal practice. The GSI recognized of their students, ‘I need them to be flexible with me as well’ noting that, just as they gave extensions, they needed to offer their patience when ‘links weren’t working, or they weren’t published on the front page of [the learning management system]’.

Third, and most significantly, this resourcefulness and bounded flexibility were adopted because so many things for students were ‘out of their control’, so that the GSIs had to recognize their students not just *qua* students but as fellow human beings caught up in circumstantial moral luck—here, coming to pass in the form of a virus. The GSIs subordination of subject-matter competence to students’ lives was in recognition of their stress and emotional health and a care for students explicitly beyond their capacity to meaningfully participate in class. One instructor said, ‘I really just want to check in with them as like individuals, not necessarily even about the class, just like ‘How you’re doing?’’. Out of the 14 instructors who articulated one or more goals outside disciplinary competence, all but one articulated this general care for students. Notably, 7 out of the 13 instructors also spoke a rhetoric of moral community with their students, as in the sense that the class worked better because of a preexisting sense of community where ‘we’re all trying to learn this together’.

Langevang et al. (2022), have ‘foregrounded’ how hustling can be an ‘act of care’ (p. 151). As for teaching, Joseph Dunne (2003) has written that it is a practice that involves ‘a teacher’s care for the student as well as—and sometimes even independently of—his or her care for the subject’ (p. 355), and the ability to teach students with different levels of readiness and engagement. Likewise, Nel Noddings (2003) speaks of a ‘first great good [in teaching] (...) the development of whole persons’ (p. 250), so that part of teaching is knowing when to reasonably drop assignments and recognizing, as (she recounts) a mathematics professor told ‘a very stressed out class’ that ‘this isn’t a matter of life and death, you know’ (p.

248). One GSI said they were checking in with students ‘because they’re humans first’, another appealed to ‘our underlying human being-ness’ to describe their focus on ‘health and safety’, a third one declared ‘I just feel more focused on them as people and less focused on how perfectly I’m going to teach my class that week’, and yet another said ‘I want my students to be okay’ meaning ‘outside of all this class stuff’. Finally, one instructor echoed Noddings’s mathematics professor to say of their class ‘it’s just not that important’ in itself.

Hustle and institutional neglect

Where did the GSIs learn to hustle? In interviews conducted after emergency remote teaching had ended in 2022, the GSIs praised individual teachers but not senior faculty collectively. As one said, ‘and I’ve been very fortunate that I’ve worked with great faculty members, I think that some faculty members are probably not going to be nearly as understanding or forgiving as the ones that I know’. Still, others worried about graduate students who entered their programs during the pandemic. A GSI noted that some of these students had talked to their advisors only twice during their first year of the program, noting, bluntly, ‘and that was *crap*’. Angrily, they suggested that, for those who were tenured, there were misaligned priorities.

Other GSIs lamented institutional neglect characterized by impersonality. The GSI who mentioned their moral luck in working with ‘great faculty members’ said ‘like it’s this large bureaucracy that kind of grinds its way forward and it’s not going to (...) nothing talks to anything else’. Another suggested that the key absence in 2020 and 2021 was a ‘conversational culture’—a sense that the institution existed beyond directives and emails, as *people* to whom they could go for help with practical problems. This impersonality was in decided contrast to a small liberal arts college where they had been told by their department chair ‘if you have any questions about people, you know my door is always open’. Another GSI missed having ‘lines of communication and transparency’, noting the absence of ‘any sort of like, crowdsourcing, sharing person’ to go to if just to ‘brainstorm’. Yet another noted that they could not ‘put a face on the person who’s giving me these big emails’—there was no ‘point person’ to whom they could go.

The institutional presence as limited to innumerable emails suggested to some GSIs that the pandemic exacerbated existing problems. It let them see what had always been there. For one GSI, the lack of support suggested that large, public universities did not prioritize teaching, which was echoed by another who noted that the need for basic directives revealed ‘there are faculty members who are just

learning how to use [the learning management program]’. For that second GSI, the dearth of support also raised questions about graduate student labour issues, particularly the lack of ‘checks and balances really to hold faculty accountable’. For others still, the pandemic experience raised questions about whether universities could ever manifest the empathy that they had shown as individuals. One GSI, since graduating, noted that their newer academic institution would provide a resource in the manner of ‘if a student is struggling call this number’ but did not take steps to ensure that instructors would even know about the resource. ‘It’s all very like individual’, they opined, and, thus, ‘there was a lack of structural support that would have demonstrated empathy I think’.

This lack created problems, because the GSIs saw the real narrative of the pandemic as being the impulse to increase their capacity to show flexibility and empathy in difficult times. And this ethic of perseverance in care creates problems for academic citizenship because of what one GSI, after praising their ‘little crew of people’ and ‘the professors that I have been able to work with’, called the ‘*disjuncture* [our emphasis] between the folks that I interact with and the institution that I interact with’. Likewise, another spoke of discovering ‘appreciation for student lives outside of your classroom, which I think K-12 educators are really adept with’, and *not* having seen that ‘amongst university educators’. After praising colleagues as ‘good point[s] of contact’ yet another GSI said ‘it almost felt a little bit like the expectation from the university was just to keep doing whatever you’re doing’ which would be unreasonable, as they had earlier described themselves as having to assume the shape of a ‘dodecapus with like 12 arms or something like that’.

Tellingly, when describing the significance of the pandemic, besides mentioning flexibility—thus, the dodecapus reference, the GSIs, despite their academic status, reached for non-traditional and perhaps non-academic language. Two of them spoke of ‘offering my students a lot more grace’ and ‘grace and, you know, things like that’, and another mentioned their hope that ‘more professors will approach their position with grace and dignity of the human’.

Conclusion: Hustling, final goods, and academic citizenship

If the dramatic structure of the pandemic is a hustle, based on graduate student instructors’ ability to grasp it as, in the words of one of them, a ‘humanizing experience’ that called them to see the students as ‘people’, and work towards that, its meaning for academic citizenship is at once direct and demanding. Even as the GSIs invoked ‘empathy’ and ‘flexibility’, their institution was unable to either

provide support or manifest an ethic of care. If the GSIs were able to maintain the hustle, it was the result of informal networks, community economies of mutual help, and well-honed self-reliance. If the institution is meant to be the object of Broudy's (1972) 'enlightened cherishing' and provoke an aesthetic response, it must act differently. How might a large public university manifest empathy, especially as, it should be mentioned, empathy itself can lead us astray, including into burnout?

Our participants seemed to envision 'empathy' as the means for seeing their students as human beings and, in turn, desiring that their students see them as people. They often wanted the institution to present human beings to them for difficult problem-solving in place of bureaucracy, rules, and the ever-increasing number of emails. Our exercise in empirical philosophy suggests that GSIs, when saying that what is ultimately important is 'knowing they're [the students] going to be okay' are gesturing towards a final good for their students amidst tragedy, still present when other academic goods become elusive if not unattainable. Their hustle requires a concept of human flourishing, as well as that intellectual meta-virtue, practical wisdom. After all, there are no sufficient sets of rules or procedures for semesters like the one of Spring 2020, marked as they are by tragedy and educational trade-offs.

Regarding practical wisdom, some teacher educators have recognized that it is not a competence but a [meta]virtue that must be internalized through modelled forms of learning, including aesthetic education. That is, practical wisdom presupposes the formation of professional 'persons', not the mastery of unintegrated techniques or practical strategies (Biesta, 2015). Further, if practical wisdom is to be attentive to students' well-being we would argue that it must draw on another virtue—*miseritordia*, which Alasdair MacIntyre (1999) sees as the capacity (not just a passion) beyond communal or conventionally-defined professional obligations, for 'grief or sorrow over someone else's distress' (p. 125)—here, for students who remain students but must be 'okay' in a deeper sense and before all else.

Cultivating this virtue has two implications for academic citizenship. First, it will carefully set boundaries around hustle while maintaining its existential future-orientation. The GSI who most exemplified the hustle, and explicitly used the term, noted 'I like had my first job at 14, so I, and I've never stopped, I've always had a job' but concluded their description of trying to help graduate students and 'leverage different things' by saying 'so weird, I hate the hustle culture'. At a certain point, the hustle can become less hopeful than self-destructive and masochistic—if, we would argue, it is impossible to see it as directed to a final good. Second, it will clarify that senior faculty who act as role models can be seen as exemplary because of the directionality in their academic lives, and the academic

community is worth cherishing as a community because participation in it is participating in a common good—a good that we participate in not as individuals but as members of the community (MacIntyre, 2016), even if that good is for now uncertain. Institutions should explicitly speak of boundaries, directionality, and the common good, lest hustle become less about *miser cordia* than exploitation.

Observing GSIs during the COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder that academic citizenship, as Andrew Peterson (2021) writes, should be based on ‘enlightened cherishing’, but that the cherishing must indeed be ‘enlightened’. Otherwise, it will never survive tragedy.

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