

The Necessity of Genre Disruption in Organizing an Advocacy Space for and by Graduate Students

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nextGEN

Introduction

On November 6, 2018, graduate students via nextGEN (2018) composed and sent a “listserv-to-listserv” email, actioning a collective and bold return to the Writing Program Administration-Listserv (WPA-L). Taking two weeks for a spontaneous graduate student collective to digitally complete, this response built upon momentum-based community organizing to escalate the contrast between the two listservs and spotlight the structural inadequacy and rhetorical irresponsibility of WPA-L’s genred discursive space.¹ The nextGEN listserv itself emerged from a campaign to build an advocacy space for and by graduate students. The product of a single campaign cannot build and does not encompass the totality of a movement necessary for graduate students to achieve equity. nextGEN therefore responds to the needs of graduate students (domestic and international) and will build, organize, and grow as necessary. Since the symposium’s central themes concern sustainability, self-care, resources, equity, and justice, we, the first three nextGEN listserv moderators, reflect on the need for genre disruption in a field that touts striving for these values, but continuously replicates inequitable, unjust practices. We share insights from our praxis of creating, building, and organizing an advocacy space for graduate students centering around principles of justice, equity, and community. This essay focuses on nextGEN’s genre-disrupting, genre-creating orientation, drawing upon three rhetorical elements to social movement-building: disruption, sacrifice, and escalation. We suggest moving past limiting institutionalized genres, looking to opportunities that social movement genres afford for advancing and habitualizing equitable, just practices.

Part 1: Genre in Traditional Spaces: Disruption

Representing WPA-GO, Presswood and Schwarz (2020) draw us to think about how a precarious population might incite change within a field at large that does not seem to have structural support for holding people and programs accountable. This consideration’s importance cannot be overstated. Lack of accountability exists within our own institutions and the larger field. What would building robust accountability structures entail in Rhetoric and Composition

¹ We follow Nowacek (2011) in defining “genred discursive space” as a “constellation of associated social relations, goals, identities, ways of knowing [and feeling], and even knowledge domains” (p. 19).

(Rhet-Comp), a field Lauer (1984) described as a “dappled discipline” that reflects a patching-together of multiple disciplinary ideas leading to the “complex, messy, and rock-bottom realm [that is] Composition Studies” (p. 28)? We believe the answer involves dappling with, learning from, and building upon social movement genres. Here, we’re inspired by Kynard (2013), who “situate[s] the social world of composition studies in its connections to Black Power, Black Studies, and the Black Arts Movement” (p. 15). We also praise Bowman and Kovanen (2020), who advocate for the frameworks borrowed from labor activism, addressing how Rhet-Comp grew as a discipline in response to disputed labor conditions. Likewise, nextGEN’s creation spurred generally from protest over white language supremacy on WPA-L, and from faculty dismissal of and outrage over a graduate student’s anti-racist contribution. Historically “online forums including . . . listservs can be spaces where rising scholars like graduate students and junior scholars learn about the spirit of the field and contribute their emerging perspectives” (Glotfelter & Tham, 2018, para. 1). However, what happens if and when they are not welcome to do so?

WPA-L operates as a longstanding disciplinary space in existence since 1991, when writing studies was beginning to establish itself.² Unfortunately, it has cultivated its genred discursive space over this time towards boundary-maintaining and mere information-sharing, rather than community-building and power-sharing. Graduate students therefore organized via their own already-existing social networking spaces, adopted the older genred technology of a listserv, and built a consolidated graduate-centered space dedicated to enriching conversations among graduate students, early-career faculty, non-tenure-track faculty, and adjuncts.³

But listservs traditionally don’t organize community uplift spaces at conferences, collectively write responses to other listservs, and have Twitter accounts; however, nextGEN does. Several questions have therefore been posed to those involved in nextGEN: What does nextGEN want to *be*? An organization? A standing group? To respond, we ask ourselves and others: How would institutionalizing nextGEN into disciplinary academic genres dissolve some of nextGEN’s current and potential power?

As the first moderators, we don’t wish to assimilate to disciplinary genres that limit movement potential, but desire to build from and beyond them. We especially seek to disrupt historically institutionalized hierarchies and power structures reifying systemic oppressions. We work to disrupt the hierarchical genre of networking by emphasizing, first and foremost, the value of horizontal

² According to Flaherty (2019), “Dave Schwalm, professor emeritus of English at Arizona State University, founded the listserv in 1991, when writing studies was still an emerging field and considered to be a “duty” of many English departments. (Today there are about 4,000 subscribers, though many accounts are probably inactive.)” (“The End of the List?” para. 6)

³ See the Glotfelter & Tham’s (2018) interview with representatives of nextGEN’s Startup Team for more on nextGEN’s formation.

networking and the celebration of graduate student scholars, moving past the tradition of valuing and lauding veteran teacher-scholars more than new voices. nextGEN creates space for horizontal mentoring⁴ by cultivating a community praxis of uplifting and supporting one another rather than viewing each other as competition. It's crucial to re-vision the hierarchical genre of mentoring that traditionally happens in one-on-one settings locally. Many graduate students may not receive adequate institutional support, and we hope and believe spaces like nextGEN can provide opportunities to experience the value of horizontal mentoring.

nextGEN's existence necessitates this form of hierarchical genre disruption. After all, its genred discursive space works to flip the script of faculty power. We've been clear that faculty can have a presence on nextGEN. The community voted to have it be so. However, faculty must participate in a way that reflects the digital praxis of feminist methodological ethos, which emphasizes decentering themselves, uplifting underrepresented voices, and being open to critique (Larson, 2018). nextGEN thus has evolved as a space where graduate students offer guidance, provide resources, and support each other emotionally and professionally. We therefore see nextGEN as not only a community, but also a movement. It's a rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) movement that grows and spreads by assembling via digital and conference spaces to advocate for graduate student welfare. We work to advance, at times, a disruptive movement in order to create hope, reliance, and space for Rhet-Comp graduate students, including us.

In what follows, the initial three nextGEN moderators reflect on the need for this genre disruption. To be clear, nextGEN isn't an organization with a governing body—it's a listserv that networks itself into other digital spaces (like Twitter); however, social movement organizing principles and practices have been instrumental to nextGEN. With the space established, a central consideration is what becomes of this space. Does it emerge to only sink from use and memory due to a lack of attention and engagement? What's the role of moderation for a space without a developed cultural, disciplinary identity? It became clear, early on, that part of moderation would be community-building and -organizing.

Part 2: First Year Moderator Reflections: Sacrifice

Kyle Larson's Moderating Story

I wrote an antiracist response to the reaction on WPA-L to Vershawn Young's (2018) 2019 Conference on College Composition and Communication call for

⁴ VanHaitsma and Ceraso (2017) describe horizontal mentoring "quite simply, as mentoring (the offering of help, guidance, and training) that is carried out within a horizontal rather than hierarchical relationship (between peers, as opposed to a more and less experience mentor and mentee" (p. 211).

proposals. Consequently, senior scholars publicly shamed me and privately wrote a “mentor” of mine, who subsequently distanced themselves from me and with whom I no longer work. It says a lot about the field’s center of power when the most vocal reaction to antiracism is outrage, rather than outrage being directed toward the alignment with white supremacist discourse.

Some graduate students and early-career faculty expressed solidarity with me on different social platforms. On Twitter, Lucy Johnson, Estee Beck, and I began discussing the need for graduate students to have our own space. Estee Beck then named nextGEN and secured the listserv space through her university. Lucy and I met that weekend on March 25, 2018, to strategize actualizing nextGEN. We subsequently tweeted a recruitment call for Startup Team members. Less than two weeks after my response on WPA-L, nextGEN went live.

Three Startup Team members volunteered to become moderators: Sweta Baniya, Ashanka Kumari, and me. To be perfectly honest, I volunteered to moderate based more on a feeling of responsibility than excitement. The genre of moderation just felt lacking and tired... It felt disconnected from the reasons behind the space’s exigence, history, and emerging identity. It became clear, however, in its first week that this space needed more than the dominant genre of moderation if it was going to develop into an important and sustained space of community engagement. It didn’t need moderators; it needed community organizers.

Maybe our willingness to move past institutionalized academic genres results from the three of us being first-generation students. I’m not sure. But I do know I have been incredibly fortunate to co-moderate with Sweta and Ashanka.

Sweta Baniya’s Moderating Story

I didn’t know WPA-L existed or I could ever be a part of it. As an international student navigating the field, there was a dearth of information on these kinds of spaces. After reading discussions on WPA-L, I as an international student felt very out of place, as I came here leaving a patriarchal, hierarchical, and gendered space in Nepal. As Twitter was/is my space for navigating academia, I saw Kyle’s tweet calling for students interested in creating a listserv, and I expressed my interest.

Historically, international students have fewer opportunities at home institutions, which limits our abilities to gain professional experience. That’s why I signed up. Being involved with the Startup Team offered a chance to contribute and be a voice for international Rhet-Comp graduate students. Scholarship invites conversations from around the world; however, the field remains limited in understanding and hiring international graduate students. Responding to this, nextGEN members wrote a letter against discriminatory hiring practices regarding international graduate students. This letter, composed by listserv

members, calls for faculty (who serve as search committee chairs, members, and beyond) to advocate for international scholars and against policies adversely impacting them (nextGEN, 2019). This statement has been pivotal in raising awareness about international graduate student issues. We gathered signatures of support from nearly four hundred scholars, faculty members, organizations, caucuses, and special interest groups.

When I started my role as a moderator, I didn't know what role I was taking up. A year and a half later, I have found that nextGEN has been an important asset in helping me establish my identity as an international graduate student. nextGEN was the need of the hour—to raise, discuss, and share graduate student concerns and push the field towards becoming more graduate-student friendly.

Ashanka Kumari's Moderating Story

Moderating nextGEN has evolved far from what we expected. In fact, Kyle, Sweta, and I recently discussed how the term “moderator” in the traditional sense doesn't really encapsulate our work so much as “community organizer.” The work of initiating and growing nextGEN means shaping a space that grew and continues to grow rather quickly, and striving to build guidelines and support that best meet and serve the community. Because of the dynamic response, we continue to give nextGEN our energy to maintain momentum.

It's been a little more than a year since we established this space. Today, we have more than 500 listserv subscribers, engaging in weekly discussions on a variety of Rhet-Comp topics. We've made numerous professional strides to be proud of, including a collaboratively co-authored listserv-to-listserv response to problematic decorum on WPA-L, calling for a code of conduct and moderators in that space (nextGEN, 2018), and an international students anti-discriminatory open letter (nextGEN, 2019).⁵ Additionally, nextGEN co-founders have helped organize numerous graduate student gatherings at national conferences. In his greeting message, 2019 CCCC Program Chair Vershawn Ashanti Young (2019) highlighted the role of nextGEN as a “group of multiracial graduate students talkin' bout: we at the C's and in dis profession, y'all better recognize” (p. 5). Recently, the Startup Team's service was recognized with the 2019 Kairos Service Award—and this was just in its first year.

And while these numerous steps forward, recognitions, and movements appear impressive, they would not exist without the labor of numerous unpaid graduate students including and beyond the Startup Team. Our discipline continually values research and teaching labor above service work. Service like editing journals, organizing conferences, serving on committees, and, in this case, moderating a listserv are historically unpaid labor, typically not valued like research and teaching for tenure. Arguably, many of us spend as much if not

⁵ See also Flaherty (2019), which describes the impact of this WPA-L moment.

more time in service roles, places where we interact with community members within and outside our institutional borders. So why do we continue to ignore or undervalue this labor?

For hundreds of graduate students in precarious positions, nextGEN offers an additional avenue to receive mentorship, gain insight about the discipline, and grow as teacher-scholars. We ask questions. We build bibliographies. We share resources. We collaborate.

Part 3: Conclusions about Advocacy Space: Escalation

nextGEN is an evolving advocacy space. Traditional academic genres alone are insufficient in building praxis necessary for responding to institutionalized inequities. Including social movement genres into the disciplinary assemblage of possibilities, however, affords opportunities to quickly act and campaign in kairotic response to community and disciplinary needs. nextGEN builds and disrupts traditional academic genres to achieve community uplift for and with graduate students. We originating moderators see this space as demonstrating and escalating disciplinary re-visions necessary for actualizing community, equity, empowerment, and justice. In every way, our space fosters networked partnerships among graduate students while supporting our rights and welfare. And, we hope nextGEN will continue to do so.

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