

The Secret Life of Grad Students: *A Journey into Multiphrenia*



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“Can I get on there--quick--it won’t take a moment?” Kathryn swings around the corner like a steam train, slams some books into her cubicle, and hurdles a container into the microwave. “I’ve got to get this email to Dr. Snider before 3:00.” Carley closes her files and moves her things as Kathryn jams a floppy into the drive. “Damn, where is it? I know it was here--I think it was this disk,” she exclaims to no one in particular as she rummages through her briefcase, still looking for files on the computer. “Maybe I saved it on the hard drive--which computer was I on yesterday?”

It’s a rerun repeated daily. Kathryn is a graduate student and a teaching assistant in the Speech Communication department at the Pennsylvania State University. She is always in a

mad rush--always bumping someone off the computer. Kathryn has just come from teaching three sections of SPCOM 100A and desperately needs to get that email to Dr. Snider concerning tonight's seminar on "Family Dynamics." Kathryn doesn't have a computer at home which is a rarity for graduate students who view them as lifelines to academic success. The department provides a scant few computers in the TA offices--the game is to figure out which one will be working today.

And then there's Jill who is a bit introverted and computer shy. She has a computer at home but doesn't want to hook it up to the Net; it's too complicated. Kara has a computer and uses the Net frequently, but still goes through the manual connect script because she hasn't taken the time to set up the preferences correctly. She keeps getting bumped off of the server, but can't figure out why. The university provides Internet access to all of its students so most graduates have computers at home and are wired up to the Net.

Graduate students are a peculiar lot. Much like caterpillars in a cocoon, they are constantly between states--between teacher and student, reader and writer, authority and subject, and friend and colleague. As if the complicated and shifting roles graduate students play weren't enough, they are also required to co-exist in "cyber" and "real" space. Grads are wired in; they must be. Teaching Assistants are expected to communicate with their students, professors, office personnel, and a diversity of university departments via email. They are consigned to list serves concerning teaching assignments and meetings. They subscribe to "support" list serves created to allow the graduate population to communicate important information without faculty intervention.

Many will be on list serves for seminars. Once or twice a week, they will be expected to post their interpretations of readings to their peers. In many of these seminars they are encouraged to engage their peers in discussion and argumentation over diverse issues, all under the close scrutiny of the professor. Many times the professor is their advisor, the chair of their committee, or even their supervisor. Students who are often apprehensive to speak during the seminar develop strong voices through the list serve (Sproull and Kiesler 90). This is

definitely an advantage of the Net, yet it rarely translates to better face-to-face seminar discussions. Those who find a voice through the Net often find that voice restricted to the cyber domain. The professor, as manager, is the primary determinate of the character of the cyber discussion. And although the Net can be a tool for self-expression and community, it is questionable whether these benefits translate from the cyber and into the real (Silberman 60).

The mental state Kenneth Gergen describes as multiphrenia is likely already engaged before the Net is even an issue. Multiphrenia, as defined by Gergen in his article "Social Saturation and the Populated Self" is, "the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments" (30). Grad students play many roles and populate many possible selves throughout the course of a day. According to Gergen, this self-population coupled with the potential technologies for relationship leads one to the postmodern condition. As will be born out later, graduate students reliance on the Internet for information and communication coupled with their inherent skepticism of the Net is indicative of the multiphrenic mindset.

Kathryn is a perfect example of a modern researcher living a postmodern, mutiphrenic, life. There is never enough time, and many, like Kathryn, find themselves lonely and socially isolated. Sure there are innumerable departmental parties and meetings, but the forum for true intimacy is rarely available. Many turn to the Net for their social needs and relaxation. It isn't uncommon for TA's to stay up until 4:00 AM researching, chatting, emailing, and surfing. Email becomes a lifeline to family, friends, and lovers. Even this seemingly rosy use of technologies follows Gergen's argument, spiraling one closer and closer to a multiphrenic existence of indecision (33).

Graduate students in Speech Communication are uniquely qualified to be reflexive users of the Net. Critiquing popular culture is second nature to most with an interest in rhetoric. Those focusing on communication theory often look at the impact of such technologies upon families and interpersonal relationships. It is not surprising then that the very things which appeal to the graduate student also give rise to suspicion. Grad students defy M. Kadi's concerns about Internet restrictions based on economic standing, grads are given a particularly

elite position in the services available to them. Kadi's argument in "Welcome to Cyberia" concerning the self limitations of the Net holds true, however, in that graduate researchers tend to end up in the same old cul-de-sac of opinions--often sounding like a broken record (40).

A rather informal survey of a relatively small sample size helps paint a picture of the average graduate student in the Speech Communication department. All of those surveyed were frequent users with 60% judging themselves expert users. Almost all had used computers frequently at their previous universities for a variety of classes. Interestingly, most said their families were computer users--many using the Net frequently. One of the primary uses for families was to keep in touch with their children away at school.

When asked the advantages of the Net, the responses were fascinatingly similar: "Accessibility to info around the world immediately," "rapid exchange of info," "quick info," "we can acquire information more quickly now," "increased transfer and access to information," "convenient fast access to information," and "information gathering." Every respondent mentioned the rapid transfer of information as the primary advantage to the Internet. Joel qualified his response, "Fast access to a variety of information that may or may not have real consequences or implications for making our existence better" (Schlamacher). Carley was also hesitant calling into question the validity and usefulness of the "mediocre information" (Simone). As Langdon Winner points out, information does not equal knowledge or democracy (47). Grads are well aware of this. It doesn't take shuffling through too many undergrad papers to see that the Net is often taken as gospel truth, that sources aren't checked out, and that opinions are bought wholesale. Again, graduate students are a unique group whose training is geared towards just the critical skills needed to make sense of information on the Net. Not to say that grads aren't hoodwinked on the Net periodically, but that they are better prepared to use the Net wisely than the general population. Pseudo-intellectualism is, however, rampant on the Net.

Concerning communication, few would agree with the utopian vision of a level playing field geared towards revolutionary change (Elmer-Dewitt's 7). Rather, for graduate students,

communication on the Net is a practical endeavor. Grad students are usually quite poor and the Net allows for free communications around the world. This can be quite enticing, particularly considering the desire for social interaction. Of all the areas which those surveyed voiced concerns, communication was the area in which they were most vocal. Even though they all used the Net to communicate, most found the communications they had over the Net to be “impersonal,” “faceless,” “hyperpersonal,” “hurried,” and “sterile.” Gideon expressed concerns over the illusion of a pseudo-community, of a sense of abandonment and alienation (Bartlow). Many were concerned over the lack of face-to-face communication which alleviates monitoring. Kara expressed a loss of humanity and personhood:

I try to avoid communicating with others via the Internet (email). I believe each person deserves the little effort it takes us to actually call on the telephone or speak in person to that individual. When someone says to send them an email rather than take the time to listen to what I have to say, I feel insulted and I refuse to do that to others. (Steele)

These concerns over the emptiness of communication on the web are currently hot news items. A recent edition of *Newsweek* in an article entitled “Online and Burnt Out” stated:

The American Psychologist, reported the startling news that the Internet, the very touchstone of the new American capitalism, is actually bad for some people’s psychological wellbeing. . . . The more time subjects spent at their keyboards, the more depressed and lonely they were at the end of the experiment.” (Adler 84)

The imposed isolation of graduate life finds the Net both as means for socialization and for information acquisition. The process of becoming a researcher positions one to question the value of communication and information on the Net. As reluctant users of the Net, graduate students are kept within the shifting groundwork of multiphrenia. The roles they play demand its use, yet the results both personally and professionally can often be disheartening. Graduate school is often a time of dishevelment and groundlessness, but the very nature of the Net and its current incorporation into graduate culture only further confounds the problem.

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