

# Chapter 15

## Imagining Graduate Students: Understanding Technologized Communication Practices Online

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### ABSTRACT

*How do we foster effective communication online with graduate students? This project looks closely at what communicating online with graduate students looks like, and imagines an answer to the question that is both figurative and literal. Figurative in the sense that this question should be approached with imagination, through the imaginary, and with an understanding of address. And, literally in that it proposes specific communicative practices for consideration. Online offers us unique opportunities to change our mode of address. Fostering effective online graduate students means (re)imagining graduate school by recognizing mode of address, mentoring, technology, and rhetorically listening-to.*

### INTRODUCTION

Imagine. You have come into a room, and in this room, you notice that everyone is deep in conversation. You realize that it is a conversation you want to join, but you also realize that this particular conversation has been going on for long time, and that it will continue on long after you have decided to leave it. Because of this, you realize that this conversation has a specific and particular past, present, and future. And as you listen in, you also realize that you have come into this conversation without the language, knowledge, and the skills you need in order to participate in the conversation. How will you communicate? How will you become a part of this conversation? What knowledge and skills do you need to become a part of this conversation? This scenario is, of course, Kenneth Burke's parlor (1974, 110-111). Except now, imagine that Burke's parlor is online and there are graduate students waiting for you to help them become part of the conversation.

How do we foster effective communication online with graduate students? This project looks closely at what communicating online with graduate students' looks like, and imagines an answer to the question that is both figurative and literal. It is figurative in the sense that this question should be approached with

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imagination, through the imaginary, and with an understanding of address. It is literal in that it proposes specific communicative practices for consideration. To that end, I submit that fostering effective online graduate students means (re)imagining graduate school by recognizing mode of address, mentoring, technology, and rhetorically listening-to. Who does graduate school think that graduate students are? And, now more than ever, it matters who the social imaginary thinks graduate students are and how they become professionals. Online educational environments have changed the mode of address and the social imaginaries understanding of graduate school and graduate students. Graduate school has a certain mode of address and shapes students in certain ways. We need to fully understand what we are asking of faculty, staff, and students when it comes to online graduate students. One of the primary things to consider is that “educational texts address students as if their pedagogies were coming from nowhere within the circulating power relations...by presenting themselves as desiring only understanding, educational texts address students as if the texts were from no one, with no desire to place their readers in any position except that of neutral, benign, general, generic, understanding” (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 47). But, educational texts, and especially in screened, online environments, like learning management systems (LMS), are not neutral, benign, general, nor generic, and should not be accepted as such when it comes to fostering communication with online graduate students. Because, graduate students are finding their professional interests, developing their professional personas and academic projects, personas and interests that will not be neutral or generic either, because ours, the teachers of graduate students, are not. Further, technology is not neutral, and as Heidegger cautioned, we need to think about our thinking when it comes to technology. Technology orders knowledge, constructs identities, and situates understanding into calculations for ordering and reordering to be called forth at will as a means for particular ends. It does not serve us to think of online as a tool, and particularly not as a teaching tool as the instrumentality metaphor has a particular mode of address that constitutes subjects and objects into particular positions including graduate students. Who or what is the screen, online, and learning management systems (LMS) asking us to be? And, from what address are we being asked to speak from? Online offers us unique opportunities to change our mode of address. Perhaps, the most important is the skill of rhetorically listening-to another. In a gesture to-listening-to each other, this chapter covers 1) how imagination, the imaginary, and mode of address construct our understandings of graduate studies and graduate students, 2) imagines mentoring graduate students, 3) discusses the screened, online technologized relationship the imagination and the imaginary have with education and mode of address, and 4) suggests rhetorically listening-to graduate students via questioning, partial understandings, and paradox. One final note, the definitions below are not meant to be stable, fixed, or complete throughout this work, as there is always already “bleed through” of any definition we work to establish, and this work is particularly an invitation to imagining how to foster online communication with graduate students.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **What Is the Imagination?**

Before re-imagining takes place, the imagination needs a working definition. Imagination actually has many different meanings. There is the generally understood definition of the imagination, which means being creative and resourceful—commonly expressed as, using your imagination—it is the creation of something new, but not real though in some cases the something is ultimately made real. According to

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