

Betwixt and between: the borderlands of grad studies and the trolls that haunt them

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Victor Turner was a well-known anthropologist that studied and theorized liminality as a temporary state of transition around which social and cultural groups enact rituals to usher group members from one state of being into another. The transitions were typically from certain social categories to others, from boyhood to manhood, for example. Graduate studies are an analogous liminal period, with several rituals to transition students from novice to independent scholar (e.g., specialization exam, candidacy exam, dissertation defense). Unlike many traditional rituals practiced by the cultural groups that Turner studied, the transition to independent scholar lasts many years. An extended liminal existence creates many opportunities, but also holds people in a position of questionable and marginal social status within academic institutions and their careers.

This precarious position is largely institutionally imposed, if grad students were to leave and start their careers rather than continue their studies they would soon find that the academic concerns bearing on them are mere trifles—from a different institutional position. This is not to say that these academic concerns are arbitrary or without meaning, or that graduate students do not hold positions of privilege in society more broadly. Student concerns are meaningful, have consequences, and their relative status to people without access to education pays dividends.

Unfortunately, this transitional period is a borderland haunted by trolls who do not seem to fully comprehend the system in which they themselves are embedded and who deem that their time making the transition more difficult and uncomfortable for their colleagues is time well spent. That is, they do this to individuals who would be colleagues if the trolls would only see them as such. Instead, the trolls sit under their bridges and ruminate while the colleagues gather, share ideas, offer support, and yes, complain about their shared liminality. Sometimes colleagues may even work to tweak institutional practices in order to make them less painful for All. Turner regarded such commiseration as a characteristic common to rites of passage and liminal experiences that created what he referred to as “*communitas*”, to not take part was to risk excluding oneself from often sacred processes and might jeopardize a successful transition.

Despite the labor of trolls who work to make passage painful for their potential colleagues, the borderland of graduate studies offers many opportunities. Volunteering on committees provides access to otherwise opaque operations of university life that shape how professors and students go about their work, as well as valuable experience that employers on and off the tenure track will regard favorably. Employers want to see team players, evidence of ability to set agendas, ability keep meetings on time, skill to manage commitments to committees in addition to delivering on duties that are already expected as part of one's job. While many committees have ceased to be a means to an end within universities, instead becoming an end in themselves, they often play an important institutional role. They symbolize and perform that the university is a legitimate and modern institution, one that is comparable to all the others. If for example, the

University of Alberta ceased to have a Student's Union, Graduate Student Association, or a General Faculties Council (the Senate in other provinces), the other universities would soon regard it as a lesser institution, students would likely stop enrolling, and much work would be necessary to repair its reputation.

Busy bodies are not toxic to organizations, trolls are. By trolling they contribute to a culture that profanes the transitional experiences and present risks to their academic units, particularly when such trolling takes place in a public forum such as a blog. Imposing such risk may also be an intention of the troll's work, to devalue their department and as such, their own credential, but it is hard to know whether trolls are self-aware to such a degree that this occurs to them. When other universities and departments recommend students investigate where they should go to continue their studies, they may well find evidence of trolls and think twice about their application. Some students might be willing to tolerate life in a poisonous environment for extended periods, but when I was vetting doctoral programs one of my primary selection criteria was departmental culture, I'm certain others use this criterion as well.

When I was working with Dr. Naomi Krogman on her report to the Provost regarding graduate student success and mentorship I called a number of highly ranked public research universities that seemed to be implementing particularly innovative practices to support students and faculty. My conversation with an Ombudsperson at one institution stands out in my mind when I think of trolls and the poisonous culture they promote. At the institution in question the Ombud's Office had completed a survey of faculty, graduate students, and post-docs. Results clarified that a large percentage (I would have to dig up notes, but if memory serves it was above 80%, and forgive me for paraphrasing) said that they were regularly bullied, felt helpless, felt suicidal, said they were considering leaving the institution or academia altogether. Over the course of five years the Ombudsperson worked with a team to create spaces for people to share their concerns and continued the surveys to get feedback on how people felt about the institution and their colleagues. Over time they discovered that people were still feeling stressed to varying levels, but that they no longer felt hopeless and began to feel that the institution wasn't so bad after all. While this is just one example it does demonstrate that having spaces and media through which to commiserate are important. Trolls need not participate if they don't want to. Instead they can sit under their bridges, complain about busy-bodies, and write mean-spirited anonymous memos, and in an ideal world keep such notes to themselves.

Unfortunately trolling often also involves bullying, or at least contributes to organizational culture that is conducive to it and such practices should never be tolerated. Yet I suspect that if trolls were to come out of their hideaways, stop haunting the borderlands, and consider what they have in common with their erstwhile colleagues, they would find—as Turner described in his work—a community happy to embrace them.