**Episode 3: Dr. Jason Tham**

**Nupoor Ranade:** Hi there! Welcome to On the Job with the Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative podcast.

**Wil Flores:** Today, we're your hosts, myself, Wil Flores, and ...

**NR:** ... me, Nupoor Ranade.

**WF:** ... are talking with Dr. Jason Tham about what insights he has about navigating the end of student life, transitioning to the job market and, eventually, getting a job.

[light piano music plays]

**NR:** So here is Jason. Welcome to our podcast!

**Jason Tham:** Hi, thanks for having me.

**NR:** Can you please introduce yourself for our audiences?

**JT:** Sure. I am a tenure-track assistant professor of technical communication and rhetoric in the Department of English at Texas Tech University. Just a little bit of background. I received my PhD in rhetoric and scientific and technical communication from the Department of Writing Studies at the University of Minnesota in May 2019. And when I was completing my PhD, I was... I've taught first-year writing, technical professional communication, uh, rhetoric and network communication, and content management.

And now at Texas Tech, I teach user experience research, usability studies, information design, and discourse and technology.

**NR:** Great! Wonderful to have you here.

**WF:** Yeah! Thank you for joining us. So, we just had a couple of questions for you about the job market. But first we just wanted to know: how was the transition from being a grad student to a grad class instructor—what was that like for you?

**JT:** Sure. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have received a lot of support from my colleagues here in the Technical Communication and Rhetoric Program, as well as faculty members that are from other areas of the English department. They all provided me access to previous core syllabi, resources, gave me teaching ideas, and showed me other support that are available on campus. They also looked at my materials and preparations, and this all made the transition from being a graduate student to a faculty a lot easier than I anticipated. And as a new faculty member here, I also learned—I'm learning—to be a citizen of this excellent department and to participate in decision-making processes that directly and indirectly affect our students. And this new role has taught me to really consider my own position, my power, and privileges as I engage with different issues in programmatic design, student mentoring, collaboration and partnership, and my own research.

**NR:** Do you teach any grad level classes?

**JT:** I do. So even starting my first semester here, I was assigned to teach a graduate seminar, and this semester, I'm also teaching another grad-level course. And typically the assignment here with tenure-track faculty and tenured faculty is that we all teach a two-two load. So that means two courses per regular semester. And one of which is usually at the graduate level.

**NR:** So, how was it? Was it your first time teaching a grad class, I assume? And how was that for you? Was it intimidating or were you over-prepared or... [laughter] Some tips about how did you prepare for that?

**JT:** Yes, it is—well, technically—it is my first time teaching a graduate-level course. But back at Minnesota, I have worked with graduate students when I was teaching some upper-level writing courses at the 3000 and 4,000 level. Sometimes I have graduate students sitting in those classes as well.

And in fact, the summer before I started my position here, I was teaching in China for a couple of weeks, and the course, the practicum course that I taught there, it was a content management course. It was at the graduate level; the students who took the practicum were masters and PhD students.

**NR:** Oh great!

**WF:** Very cool. So you talked a little bit about also teaching, like first year writing and other programs. So for you, was there much of a difference—and you've already had that preparation of teaching other graduate students— was it different for you teaching a class solely dedicated to graduate education?

**JT:** Yes. Well, in terms of the content, I'm learning to facilitate conversations and discussions at the graduate level more so than just doing lectures and activities in the classroom. But also I would like to also talk about the the institutional culture and technology in the classroom that also is a change for me.

For example, all of the technical communication and rhetoric courses, the graduate seminars here, and some undergrad classes as well, are what we call hybrid, which means onsite and online students would meet for class with the instructor via Zoom, a video platform and a synchronous modality.

So this required on my end some practicing as a first-time hybrid instructor to get things right. But fortunately my students are all very forgiving and patient, and they're willing to share with me the nuts and bolts that they learned from previous classes. So we can all hold classes at some level of efficiency.

**NR:** That's really interesting. So we would also like to know while you're teaching all these classes or preparing content for these classes, we assume that a lot of it is also new and learning these new methods of delivering that content. How do you maintain your work life balance with it?

**JT:** For me, I have three points I like to mention here. So for me, it was shifting I think from working all the time as a graduate student into setting specific hours now, that I would either be in the physical office or having time at home that I know that I will work to maximize my own productivity. And each semester I also have specific time that adds up—designate—to prepare for teaching, to attend meetings, and to advice students. Those are sort of the main things that will take up most of my time. And outside my teaching hours, I have blocks of time that I try to get uninterrupted writing as much as possible. And I still write during the weekends, although I shouldn't. [laughter] I have regular non-work-related activities that I, my partner and I engage in, like going to the local animal shelter, going to the parks and spending time with our pets.

So I strongly recommend every academic to practice some kind of, you know, separation from work. And do activities that they enjoy, either themselves or with their family at any level, because I find it re reinvigorating to both the mind and the body, and also helps me to get back into work easier rather than just being in that continuous working mode, not seeing the end. So that's my strategy and advice.

**WF:** Yeah. And you've talked to about being a graduate student and just like working all the time. Was it a learning process to have to shift into this kind of, "Okay. I need to take some time away from the work itself so I can do the work."

**JT:** Yes, definitely a learning process and I still find myself learning. Cause at times, I just have this old habit of wanting to write whenever I feel like it. So. telling myself that I should only work, you know, within the regular work hours in the workweek helps. But a lot of times, you know, a lot of activities fall outside of that scope. So setting up time and being conscious about how much time you put into work also helps me see the labor.

So for instance, on weekends now I'm more conscious about when I'm working. So I'll open up my computer, I'll sit at my desk, and I'll start looking at the clock. I'd be like, "Okay. So I started at this point, I should..." And you know, before dinner time and I know for sure that I'm not writing into the night or that I'm not spending time with those that I like to spend time with.

**WF:** Nice. Awesome. That's very helpful. I always, as a graduate student, I know for me, I personally just always feel like I'm doing capital The Most, so that's good to know that it's an ongoing learning process

[overlapping audio]

**JT:** Right. I know there's some... there are some tools out there that some of my colleagues use to track their hours. So they would like use an app—I know Michael Faris does—an app that will track how much time they put into different kinds of work activities like advising and attending meetings and writing, so on and so forth. And at the end of the day, they get either a daily or weekly output of some kind of visualization of that chart.

I think that's helpful to see visually where you spend most of your time and adjust accordingly. I'm not that meticulous. So I can't use an app like this, but I can see my own calendar, right? I can see how much time I'm spending on going to meetings. How many percentage of that time is within my work week and how much time I should be blocking out for writing and for working with my collaborators. I think that helps me to see where my emphasis is, and it changes from semester to semester, too, right? At the beginning of the semester, you might want to spend more time on course prep or, you know, dealing with new students. But later on in the semester, I think it's all about, you know, providing students with support and advising, and their meetings just like sprinkled throughout the semester. So that's my own strategy, looking at the calendar and seeing how I'm using my time.

**NR:** I like all these fines and I agree definitely with chunking the time and knowing how much is too much work and we can count it because we know that there are like 40 hours and we try to keep them a bit for work and then the rest of it for other things. But workwise, in terms of the number of projects, especially as a grad student, I constantly feel like I'm not doing enough. Even if like you're doing enough, you just feel like, based on the number of projects that there are, you could be doing so much more and just the feeling of this should be enough to get a job. This should be enough to get it get tenure. How do you kind of manage that? Saying no to some things or saying yes to things. How does that get into the work life balance again and trying to maintain that?

**JT:** Right. I can totally understand your sentiment about, you know, feeling not... doing enough as a graduate student. And I was that person, wanting to do more than others and always wanting to exceed the expectations of the program. But being a faculty member, and I'm speaking for my own context here at Texas Tech, it helps for me to know what the expectation is like you say, for tenure and promotion. So I do actually have a number that I have to work toward and a number of publications and classes that I should be teaching and the service expectations for the department, university, and the profession. So using those criteria help, you know, helped me to determine what projects I should be focusing on. Should I be writing a book or should I be writing five articles?

So that helps me to plan my trajectory. And to then consider what to take on and what to wait on. You know, there are always good ideas and there always things that you can write about, right? But sometimes some of these could wait if they're not pressing. Say if you have an idea for a book, but it's not something that you could allocate time for, you could wait til you get tenure to do that kind of project. Or, my other strategy—and Nupoor you might be familiar with this—is to collaborate, right? To work with other researchers and other scholars and graduate students. And that usually can help with dividing the, the workload and to help move things forward. And I think that that is the strategy that I believe in, but it doesn't always work out because it depends on who you're partnering and who you're collaborating with as well.

So there's a timing issue, and there's also people at different stages and have different priorities. So to find that alignment sometimes requires some kind of strategy and also luck. So, yeah, so that's my experience. And like I said, having that number, having some kind of expectation clear that is spoken and, and express to me helps me to determine what to focus on.

**WF:** Right. Yeah. I'm thinking about just how ambiguous the whole process of going on the job market can seem sometimes of not knowing what to expect. So once you get past that and know what your expectations are laid out for you, I think that's really, really smart. So this kind of leads into our next question because we're a little bit interested in what your experiences were like during the job market. So if we can like rewind the clock a bit: Is there any advice you have for our listeners about navigating the job market based on your own experiences?

**JT:** For sure. My experience was I was aiming for an R1 position. So with that in mind, I crafted my materials, my CV, and my recommendation letters all sort of have that angle of wanting to be a researcher first—institution faculty. And I think one advice is to be really clear in that in that approach, you know, be sure to articulate who you are and who you want to be rather than being ambiguous. So that's number one. And second is just, it's a long... it's a marathon, right? It is not a sprint. So I started somewhere at the end of summer, putting together my materials and sending out applications, doing interviews and then visiting campuses.

And that whole process took up till early December. So it is a long process and I'm considered lucky to have an offer before the new year. So a lot of the colleagues I know from other institution wait until slightly later. So that, again, adds to the stress that you already have in your final year completing your dissertation and trying to graduate.

So I think just having that mindset that this is not going to be a sprint, that this is a long run, I think helps me to kind of put things into perspective and knowing that you can't rush this whole process. So just take it one step at a time and do what you can o fulfill the requirements and that's all. Other than that, everything is sort of out of your hands and you have to rely on those in other positions to help you and to complete this process.

Third, I guess, being... trying to stay healthy throughout this process. I know this is a cliché, but I try very hard to still workout and be outside at times when it's possible. And to just think about your own physical health and mental during this process—find your own community of support. Having a network of care I think it's really important. I spoke about this at Computers & Writing last year. Being in the community really supported my own wellbeing and that... supporting others as well, you know, being in solidarity and community. I think that is an important part of that process for me.

**NR:** Great. I really liked the point about, you know, the physical and mental health because we don't always get mentorship for that. You know, we have our own goals and our own schedules, so nobody talks about it enough, like all the time constantly around us. So that's a very personal goal, a lot of motive that you want to satisfy. But I also feel like it shouldn't be forced upon someone. So it's also becomes a choice then, you know, "How do you navigate through that?" But thanks for bringing that up. That's an excellent point.

**JT:** Certainly.

**NR:** I had a question because I don't know... are you international? Did you apply as an international account? Okay. So maybe we could have a question about that too, if you don't mind.

**JT:** Sure

**NR:** Which is not on the list, but I'm just trying to dig in.

**WF:** Sure go for it!

**NR:** So here's a question. Since you applied when you were on an F1 student visa, what were the considerations that you had or expectations from the school that you are applying to for jobs for your visa status, which could help you, you know, go through the process of immigration much easier.

**JT:** Yeah. I know this was a concern for many international scholars, but I have to clarify, I actually did not apply while I was on an F1 visa. So I was already a green card holder when I was on the job market. So I guess timing wise, this is something that international scholars should consider if they want to be employed in the U.S. It takes time to process, right, the permanent residency, if you're eligible for one. So be sure to think ahead and give that time to take place. And then you go on the job market, of course, there's no requirement that you have to be a permanent resident or citizen to apply for a position, unless it was stated that they, they do not want any of those applicants, which will be sad, I think, for the institution.

But other than that, when navigating this whole process, as far as I know, the legal side of things, your interviewers and those you meet on campus for interviews, they are not supposed to ask you about your nationality, right? So you can offer that information, but they're not allowed to officially ask you to express that. But other than that, I know the 4C has an interest group, a standing group, for international scholars. So that will be one place that I recommend looking to for resources. And there are also some communities on Facebook and Twitter that provided advice during my time that I looked into about navigating the job market as an international scholar, So those are resources that I would recommend looking into. I don't know, in technical and professional communication as a field, I haven't seen a lot of discussion or materials out there that speaks to this issue. I think this is certainly an important one, especially when we have a growing community of international scholars and graduate students. And certainly a lot of them are interested in working in the U.S. And I feel that we should pay attention to this topic. And I do not know above me with administration and with the universities hiring and HR... I'm not sure how that process is going to be like, in the future, but certainly we should raise conversations about this.

**NR:** Thanks. That's really insightful. Because I know it's a common consideration for international students or just different policies. I think this just applies to everybody who is looking for certain policies, which not the committee or not the hiring committee can answer your questions, but it's something that you need to take into like the different, I guess, bureaucratic processes and you may not always know how they do that, so.

**JT:** Right. Yeah. And this might be relevant to, you know, American scholars who want to work abroad as well. You know, I have colleagues who have gone to Canada or South America, you know, take up different jobs. So that's also, I guess, not just pertaining to international students wanting to be in the U.S., but also, American students who want to work abroad,

**WF:** This has all been super helpful and informative. We really appreciate it. So do you have any other points that you would like our listeners to know?

**JT:** I would just end with a resource that I find helpful, and it is the ATTW career workshop that is held every year at ATTW2. So sadly, this year the conference was canceled, but I do have a copy from the 2018 workshop here for the handout. So I'm willing to share and chat with anyone about this.

And I know there is also Karen Kelsky's guide, and she is the author for The Professors Is In book. So there's also a short guide online that I would recommend listeners to look up, and I find that to be straightforward and helpful during the whole process when I was on the market.

**WF:** Nice that's an excellent resource. We'll link that stuff in the show notes and in the blog post for the episode. So we appreciate that.

**NR:** Thanks for that. That's a great resource that I'm sure the audience would be interested in.

**WF:** Yeah, me too! [laughter]

So Jason, do you have any links to Twitter, LinkedIn, website that you'd like to share?

**JT:** For sure! My personal website is JasonTham.com, and my Twitter handle is JasonCKTham. And you can definitely, we can definitely connect there.

**WF:** Nice. And we'll link to those as well.

**NR:** We might reach out to you if we need anything more. [laughter]

**JT:** For sure. Yeah. I can share that link, like I said, from ATTW and Karen Kelsey's guide, and I will include my Twitter and my website link there for you as well so you have them.

**NR:** So in closing, I'd wanted to thank you, Jason, for being with us today and giving us all these great insights into applying for jobs and just living our lives as graduate students and transitioning into this huge field of tech comm and navigating it. What some of the key lessons that I got from this talk were setting up goals. And I think you made a great point about how to set clear expectations for yourself, and if the organization can help you do that, that's better. And the second thing is like preparing for a marathon. So it's not a sprint. I really liked that point. So we are here for a long time and it is a long process. It's unlike other interview processes maybe in the industries or other places where the process is much shorter, this is longer. So kind of preparing for that. So thank you for all this great advice and we enjoyed having you in here, Jason.

**WF:** Yeah. Thank you so much for your time. We really appreciate it.

**NR:** Thank you. Thanks for having me.