**Episode 7: Dr. Sweta Baniya**

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

**Nupoor Ranade:** Today, we your hosts, Nupoor Ranade

**WF:** Myself, Wil Flores...

**NR:** Talk with Sweta Baniya about the insights that she has about navigating the end of student life and transitioning to the job market.

[piano music plays]

**WF:** So here's Sweta! Hi, welcome! Thank you for joining us today. Could you tell, our audiences a little bit about yourself?

**Sweta Baniya:** Thank you for having me and it's, I think it's a great opportunity for me. My name is Sweta Baniya; I'm from Nepal. Currently. I'm a PhD candidate of rhetoric and composition at Purdue University, and I'm defending my dissertation in a week for which I'm very excited!

**WF:** Oh yay!

**SB:** Yay! [laughter] And next fall, I'll be joining Virginia Tech as an assistant professor of rhetoric and professional and technical writing.

**WF:** Congratulations.

**SB:** Thank you!

**NR:** Could you tell us more about your research and what the dissertation is about?

**SB:** Yeah, sure. So my, my research is—my dissertation project is a comparative, a competitive analysis of network communities and use of technology and crisis communications during the Nepal Earthquake and Hurricane Maria. So what I, it's a mixed methods study in which I have interviewed a lot of people who have actively responded to these two disasters, both in Nepal and Puerto Rico. And I've also conducted a social network analysis of tweets that people. Tweeted during these two events. So it's kind of like, yeah, mixed methods study. And, so my major argument is a disaster is local disasters are global issues and a lot of people, respond to the local disaster via social media and especially Twitter. So that's what I have found so far. And. Yeah. I don't think I'm explaining this very nicely.

**NR:** No, you—

**WF:** No you're doing great! That sounds fascinating!

**NR:** Yeah, you're doing great!

**SB:** Yeah, I should be more prepared.

**WF:** No, you're totally fine.

**NR:** You are! Like, yeah. This was just a question I threw out there.

**WF:** You've already done the job talk.

**NR:** And now you have a job, so you're, you're, you're great.

**WF:** Yeah!

**SB:** Yeah, I mean, and so kind of like, I would like to expand a little bit on my dissertation. So by situating, my research in disaster-affected, initially networked societies, Nepal and Puerto Rico, my study, my research conducts a comparative analysis of how people created network communities, what were, what technologies they use to communicate during disaster. And I conducted interviews with 28 participants from Nepal and Puerto Rico and, who, and those participants were like representative of local community, government officials, media personnel, and also activists, activists who were involved during Hurricane Maria and the Nepal Earthquake. So, I, as I mentioned before, I also did analysis of tweets. So I had to purchase, tweets from a sister organization of Twitter called nyp.com. And I purchased 55 million tweets, which was 35 million from Nepal Earthquake and 20 million from Hurricane Maria. So I conducted a social network analysis with these two eats, and those tweets cost me around $2,500. It was so expensive, but I was supported by my university in our, the College of Liberal Arts provides the $1,500 dollars for conducting research. So, and then the rest I had to crowdsource from my department people. So Dr. Bradley Dilger and my advisor, Dr. Rick Johnson-Sheehan, they gave me some of their research money to purchase this. So, I'm really grateful for that. And, and also I had to travel to both Nepal and Puerto Rico to gather data. So for that also, I, I wrote a lot of grants and I got two different grants to go to Nepal and Puerto Rico. So I just wanted to share that this is the research and it sounds like two different places. And, but I was able to do through a lot of support from a lot of individuals.

**WF:** Oh, very cool.

**NR:** That sounds fascinating, Sweta. It's awesome that you've got all these grants and you already have a job and your life all seems like you're ready for the next challenge, which is I think the job. So we're going to ask you some questions about what you've done so far and also about your future. The first question is how are you feeling about the transition that is going to come to your life? You know, from a graduate student, you're now going to transition into graduate course faculty. How does that feel?

**SB:** I think I feel it's, it's a really surreal moment for me because last year has been very difficult for a like a lot of jobs and that anticipation of will I get a job or not. And then even though if I had a job like, my, the decision from Virginia Tech came in really early, but it took me like a couple of months to finally realize that--finally sink in that, “Oh, I have a job and I am, not, I'm not going to be a student anymore next year.” So it took a while for me to kind of accept that, that I have a job and it was, it was a very difficult, I think the transition is difficult and exciting both, because I'm transition, transitioning from a very cozy four-year graduate student mode to a faculty, like our professors, you know, in our departments. So I, I feel like, I feel very scared, very excited at the same time. Scared because of the new environment. I have to again, restart everything and think about my, kind of like how that. I don't know. I think when I came here from Nepal as a graduate student, it was a lot of exploring, exploring the area, exploring grad school, navigating grad school. I feel like it will be similar when you are a faculty, because you have to navigate the university system. We have to navigate how to live in that place. You have to navigate your courses that you are teaching. I think the difference would be, there will be less mentorship as a faculty, because here at Purdue, when you, when we came, we were trained for a year to teach, teach our courses, but as I have already had experiences of teaching for so long, I don't think, there will be that kind of mentorship, but I'm ready to teach. I'm ready to teach with all the experiences that I have at Purdue. I think it's a new challenge that I'm ready to take on now. And it took me a while to kind of realize that. And also at Virginia Tech, there, there will be a faculty mentor who, who will mentor junior faculties like me. And there are also a lot of, resources and, and also a lot of other, assistant professor faculty whom I can talk with. And they are so friendly and already. You know, I'm already in communications with a lot of them, and having that friendship already and collegial environment is really exciting for me.

**WF:** Yeah. I'm thinking about the, the fact that we as academics usually have to make that big transition over and over and over again, not over and over again, but if you do a masters than a PhD than leading into the faculty position, it's a, it's a lot.

**NR:** Yeah, that all sounds really cool. And I'm glad that you're bracing up and you see very prepared for the future that is going to come to you. I had a question about the teaching. You said that you have been teaching at Purdue and now you'll be teaching. Are you going to teach the same courses? What is, what are the differences that you're expecting? Have they already given you the course load?

**SB:** Yes. I've been assigned two courses, which is simpler and a little bit different from Purdue. So at Purdue, I had taught English 106, which is our first-year writing, and also business writing, which is our English 420. And for Virginia tech, I will be teaching introduction to professional writing, which is similar, not the same, but similar to what, what I've been teaching at Purdue. But the course objectives are different than Purdue. Similar yet different than Purdue because of the institution, a different institution and different requirements for the students. So I'm really excited about that. And the next course that I will be teaching would be creating user documents, which is, I think, which is why I'm really excited about it because, that's a new subject that I will be teaching. And it's more related with how, really a little bit with user experiences in how to create like, manuals and other stuff and directions. So I'm really excited about that. I'm also thinking I like to do a community engagement project. So I'm also thinking about partnering with a community-based organizations and then allowing students to engage in that, in creating like usual documents for those organizations. So it's not, I have not prepared the course yet, but I'm really, I have that, that idea of how I want to do the teach the courses different from Purdue. So I I'm really excited about that.

**WF:** It sounds like you have your hands in a lot of, kind of different approaches to doing this kind of academic work like this, just this mentioning this community engagement focus with this new class. That sounds incredible given like the focus of your dissertation and your research and how those things might transfer over. Is there any way that you're seeing your research as a graduate student kind of manifest in these approaches to teaching?

**SB:** Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for asking that question because my research allows me to think about how, communities have kind of resisted against disaster and how people have come together despite their official representations and how people around the world have come together as people to respond to disaster in that community and help the community so much. So that inspires a lot in my teaching, and that's why I am really, I'm really invested in community engagement, because I feel like there should be a bridge between—I know this sounds like cliché—but there should be some bridge between university education and community, because I think students should be exposed to the, to the community problems and, and how that real, real-time experiences of working with the community in, in that. But I’ve found, I have also done community engagement projects here at Purdue. And with that, what I found is some students are really invested in working with the community and they are really, they try to understand a lot about the community and really, you know, really want to work towards the community. But some students are not, so we had to take both into account, I think, while, doing community engagement projects, because, even though sometimes I felt like I am more invested in teaching this rather than students are not so much excited about that. So I think we have to take both. So yeah, from my research, I, I've also taught a business writing course with focus to risk communication, because I thought, I think that's, that's really what I'm doing in my dissertation. And I'm asking the students specifically to work and to think about disasters, to think about how they will respond to disaster and to help them create, and think about materials that would be useful in disaster situation, is really, I think the students did a really great job during that time.

**WF:** Yeah, I mean, just thinking about the state of the world right now. This is a very salient topic!

**SB:** I know. I know. It's kind of, yeah. I'm, I'm really being—another disaster in five years. I was, I was in Nepal during Nepal Earthquake. So within this next five years, facing another pandemic is just like very, very difficult for me. And disaster research is also very emotional because, well, I did my interviews in all of those stuff, it's kinda like, I've cried a lot with the participants because, you, it's kind of like not separable. When you are, when you have faced disaster and you know—you can edit this part!

Oh! That’s totally up to you. I feel like knowing about, cause we've other people have mentioned this in some of the interviews, but knowing a little bit about the human aspect of it, of research and doing this work as academics. Like we're not just robots, we have feelings and we feel things with our participants. So it's totally up to you, but I think people would love to hear this so.

**SB:** Okay!

**WF:** Everything, just to pivot a little bit, you've talked a lot about your work and there's so much of it and you seem to be a very productive scholar and student. Could you talk to us about how you've managed your worklife balance and how you, whatever routine that you've developed, how you're going to transition that into a faculty position, because like two grants, securing department funding—I've done it. It's not the easiest thing in the world. So could you talk to us a little bit about that?

**SB:** Yeah, thank you. Well, sometimes I've been like kind of, blame for overexerting myself and not, not having any workload balance, but I think particularly in, the academic year, 2019-2020, which is, which was my job market and dissertation year, I think I have, I created kind of a work life balance. So it has been quite, very busy for me and much more busy, busy than I ever expected. Because I knew from a lot of people that job market is a full-time work, until I experienced it myself, I was just not sure what that meant by, because it required a lot of investment. So hence for working maintaining worklife balance. I created a eight-to-four schedule for myself where I'll work from 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM in my office at my university. And this allowed me to have a little bit of time to go to home and cook and eat and relax and watch Netflix for a couple of hours before I go to bed. It is very difficult for me to work at home because I want to clean or cook or watch TV and not work. Hence, being in that office space allowed me to focus only in my work. And what I also did, for maintaining that worklife balance, I enrolled myself in a dance class at my university. It was, jazz, jazz one. I can never dance. I almost failed that class. [laughter] But yeah, but it forced me to do something other than my dissertation and job market search work. And every, three days a week for one hour, I go to the dance class. It's a three credit, three- or two credit-course. So I, even, if it rains, I have to go because it's my class. And you had like, she had, my dance teacher had a strict attendance policy. And so as a student, I had to follow that. So that really helped me to take some time to relax and do some body moments. Similarly in the spring I was taking yoga classes. And which was very important for my mental and physical wellbeing, but after the crisis, everything has been halted. And also, I also tried not to work on Saturdays, except for the time where I had to meet the job application deadlines, that also allowed me to break the cycle of 24/7 work, which was very important for my mental wellbeing. So I make a lot of, I also do a lot of, listing down on my notebook, and create, try to create a schedule, even though if I, I feel to succeed in maintaining that schedule, even if I've maintain half of it, I would be happy. So that allowed me to really, create that work life balance. I think.

**WF:** So when you're listing where you just like, I need to get this, this, this, this, this done by today.

**SB:** Yeah.

**WF:** I'm a big fan of that.

**SB:** For example. Yeah. For example, I would write 1,000 words a day for my dissertation or focus on, focus like three days a week on job market, two days a week for writing dissertation. But during September and October, that didn't happen. I was just totally involved in job market search, in because, there were a lot of deadlines and you had to fulfill a lot, you know, you have to fill out a lot of forms and you have to also prepare, modify your job documents to meet that job criteria. So it was a lot of work during that, those two or three months. So I did not have time to look at my dissertation. But I tried once in a while. I tried, but I wasn't able to, and then there were, after some time in October in the middle of the October, there were a lot of Skype interviews that were coming up. So I had to prepare for that. So meeting the deadlines and then a lot of Skype interviews. And then I had campus interviews that came immediately after that. So I, it was a continuous, this up to this and this. So I had to really prepare for those things. And one thing I was always, I'll, now I think, and I kind of like, laugh about it, but I would be constantly talking my head about Skype interviews. If they would ask this, I will, I'll say this. If they will do that, even though I have, I would, I had written everything I wanted to do a share and talk about, but I, in my head, I would be constantly talking about that also cost me a little bit more sleep. But yeah. So yeah, the dance classes and listing things out in being very specific about what work I want to finish. I think that helped me a lot.

**NR:** That's that sounds really cool because I know you completed, that’s a five-year program at Purdue and you've like completed four and you have a job. So I'm sure it was a lot of pressure in different ways. You've already kind of moved into the next question, but we're just going to explicitly ask you what advice based on your experiences do you have for students on the job market right now. Wil and I will both be on the job market next year, so it's coming for us, and some of the advise that I think you've already given is chocking out, like making lists, rehearsing for interviews over and over again, even if that causes sleepless nights, planning for the dissertation in advance cause you cannot get a lot of writing done in September, October onwards. What else would you like to add to that?

**SB:** Thank you for asking me this question. I think this is, this has made me kind of reflect on what I've done in past year. So if you don't mind, I want to walk through my experiences. So in spring of 2019, I defended my prospectus and started working on my literature review and finished it. Then in the summer—but in between these, I would write a lot of grants and stuff like that. Then in the summer of 2019, I traveled to Puerto Rico and Nepal to collect my data. And also doing the summer, I finished my third chapter, which is my, which was my methods chapter. This chapter was not complete or it was very very rough. But I had a draft. So having those three chapters already done before, before my, I started working on my, on the job market was really beneficial for me because I had like around half of the work was already was already done. So I could pause the dissertation for a bit in then and work on the job market. Because I think, like I mentioned before, once you once, there are so many deadlines and then Skype interviews would come and then campus interviews would line up. So it would be very difficult. At least for me, it was very difficult for me to even think about the dissertation. And I remember going to my advisor's office and saying like, “I don't know what, what I'm doing in my dissertation. I feel so disengaged with my dissertation right now.” And he was, he would say like, “It's okay, it's okay to pause. And you will. You'll will again, come back to it.” So it was very, I think, challenging for me.

So in, in that summer, I, again like started working on my CV and publications and preparing my job documents cause I didn't know what, what kind of job talks I would prepare. I knew, you know, like all those. I didn't know anything, any idea about it. I had support from friends like Dr. Ashanka Kumari, who walked me through her folders and, you know, job documents and showed me her preparation strategy for the job market. Similarly, Erin Brock Carlson, she shared my, her entire job market folder. She was there for me whenever I asked silly questions. So that helped me make what, looking through other friends’ folders and also their materials have me a lot to think about the genre of job market documents. And it was, and then I started focusing on curating my own. So this was all before the deadlines of the job ads were because I wanted to make sure that I prepare everything before. And it was, it's a very tedious process, and it requires multiple revisions. And I remember I did not know how to write my teaching philosophy and, or I felt like very, very difficult to think and write about it even though I read a lot of other people's teaching philosophy. I felt like, okay, this is what I do in my class, but I don't, I didn't know what I do differently. So it was a lot of thinking process to think about what actually my teaching philosophy is, even though I had been teaching for for a while, but I wasn't able to articulate and I felt it a very difficult document to write.

So yeah. I closely worked with my advisor, and also Dr. Steve Parks, who helped me to revise my documents. And after Skype interviews started coming, I practiced with my friends, and also professors at Purdue created a mock interview before my real Skype interview and gave me some feedback on how should I answer. And after the campus interview came again, a lot of preparation for this based on what they had they required. So again, mentor from mentorship, from my advisor and other professors, as well as just talking and chatting about campus interviews from my senior friends, friends who have already been to campus interviews and had landed in jobs was really helpful for me. Yeah, I think those were the basic thing. I think it was very difficult for me to take care of myself during this process, especially those two months because it was a lot of stress. But how would I, you know? It's, it's just, reflecting back now it’s just Skype interview, but it was, it was so important for me during that time. So I, I pressured myself on, on doing everything to excel in it. I, I think I shouldn't have pressured myself. So much.

**NR:** so I'm curious, it sounds like you had your application packets almost ready before you even went on the job market, which is great. You know, it's a great strategy to be proactive, but I'm always curious about the kind of jobs that are jobs that are going to come out. So did you have your application packet ready for, like for example, a position that requires risk communication skills, or did you have, a packet ready for a technical communication position, which is core tech comm with UX and other things? How, what do you, what suggestions do you have, based on that? How many variations of job packets did you have?

**SB:** That's a good question. I think I had one main—I had many multiple variations of job, job market documents. So I, I think I had one, major, you know, my major cover letter, which were—in which I had a lot of paragraphs about... So again, like when you are applying to jobs, you want to see, are you applying for a teaching position or a research position? So obviously I had two different variations for teaching-oriented job in research-oriented jobs. So those were two, my two major, kind of a stockpile of paragraphs, I would say. Yeah, kind of stockpile off the, all the paragraphs that I wanted to tell in my cover letter. So when I would prepare my—and also I had this, fill-in-the-blanks kind of format. So I would say like the first paragraph would almost be similar, but I would have a blank on the position, the university, and then what I want is if it's a teaching or teaching position or research position. So I would say I have a lot of fill in the blanks, even though sentences were similar, I would, I would know that okay, for this particular position, I have to fill this in this particular blank. So I don't know if that's making sense, but...

**NR:** No, I think that's great. You know, having boilerplates, almost templated, letters, they are so much faster to work with. That's a great suggestion, Sweta. Thank you.

**SB:** Yeah. So I think that I did that a lot, and that helped me be very quicker about the deadlines, because I remember, I finished all the November job applications in the first week of November. So, and I also, I, when I would be bored and I would have like, I would have some time and when I cannot even focus on anything, I would fill out the forms and create my account. So when I am, when towards nearing the deadline, I wouldn't have to fill out the forms already, and I could just upload my cover letter, CV, teaching materials and all those materials. So that was, that's something I also did very quickly when I was just out of focus.

**NR:** Yeah.

**SB:** And sometimes it's very difficult for me to concentrate because you have your dissertation, you have that anxiety of job market. And also I felt like before, all the Skype interviews came in, I was very excited about writing my cover letter and all this preparing the job documents because it really felt, me as I'm very important and I am expert in, I have those materials, you know, when you see those materials that describe your yourself, it felt very good about, I felt very good about myself during that time. So yeah, I, I had a lot of variations and a lot of folders and one advice I was given was, when you see a job ad, create a PDF of it. Because sometimes the job ads would go away and they would remove it from the website. So I had all the PDFs of the jobs that I would be applying. So yeah, I created an Excel sheet of the job, jobs that have applied and then what positions they're required and what things that I needed to prepare so that I know for this particular job I need, I would have these things, the keywords. So keywords was another thing that I really looked on, for the—if those keywords with the job ad, I would make sure that I have those keywords in my, in the boiler plate that I've created or are full, like when I'm filling up the blanks. So I think I did that a lot in, yeah, those are the things that I did. Also sometimes I also varied my CV based on the positions, and some are, are you remember some jobs required you to have a diversity statement, diversity and inclusive statement, and some did not. And I've seen a lot of things, a variety of documents from other people as well, but I made sure that everything is one page so that—I was given advice that, you don't want, the committee would be a reading like 100 applications, so you don't want it to be too long. So I made my, my cover letter was almost three pages, three single-space pages. [laughter] I don't know if people had time to read that much. So I, he really had—and the fonts were really small and margins and everything, but I really had to cut down a lot and try to really squeeze everything because I was told I don't want to repeat everything that's on my CV. I want to, I think have a different version there. So not repeating everything that's already on the CV in your cover letter is I think very important. And, but your first few drafts are going to, would be that long. And you would, again, as you go on writing, you would repeat everything that's on your CV, because that's the template that you will be following to think about it, your work and yourself as a scholar, yourself as a future, as a future assistant professor. So I think the first few drafts is you really have to let yourself loose and get as much feedback as possible.

**NR:** That's really great advice. I mean, I'm so glad. Thanks for taking the time to, you know, get into the details about the letters, especially, and how to prepare for them. Those things are not often discussed as much, and I think everybody has their own way of working through it. So it's, it's going to really help us and our listeners too learn from, from your practice, especially. Yeah.

**SB:** Yeah. Thank you. I think I'm talking to a lot of different people about their, what their personal style is and learning about them really helped me to think about what fits for me better. And I think that they will apply for most of the people that, you know, thinking about what others did and thinking about your, what will work for you. What I think would really be beneficial.

**WF:** Yeah and that's the whole goal of this podcast too, so that's awesome!

**SB:** Yeah. Thank you.

**WF:** Yeah, this was, thank you so much. This was super helpful.

**SB:** Thank you. Thank you for having me.

**WF:** Yeah. Thank you for, for joining us. We really appreciate it. We really appreciate your time,

**NR:** Especially when your presentation, like your defense is next week, you know, thanks for making the time despite that.

**SB:** Yeah!

**WF:** Yeah, we really appreciate that.

**SB:** Thank you. It was really—

**WF:** and good luck!

**SB:** Thank you so much. It was really great talking to you both and just reflecting on what I did and yeah.

**WF:** Nice! Is there, are there any links or social media accounts that you'd like our listeners to know about like a Twitter or LinkedIn or Facebook?

**SB:** Yeah. I can email those to you.

**WF:** Okay. We'll have them in the show notes. Well! Thank you again and have a good day.

**SB:** Thank you. Thank you. And good seeing both of you! Have a good day, bye-bye!

**WF:** Bye

**NR:** Bye!