**Episode 8: Dr. Ashanka Kumari**

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

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

**NR:** Nupoor Ranade

**WF:** Are talking with Dr. Ashanka Kumari about what insights she has about navigating the end of student life, transitioning to the job market, and eventually getting a job.

[piano music plays]

**NR:** So here is Ashanka!

**WF:** Yay!

**NR:** Welcome to our podcast.

**WF:** Welcome!

**Ashanka Kumari:** Hi, thanks!

**NR:** Thanks so much for being with us today. Can you start by telling the audiences more about yourself, your research, where you're at and yeah. Whatever you'd like.

**AK:** Yeah. So I'm currently an assistant professor of composition and rhetoric at Texas A&M University-Commerce. We're the second largest in the Texas A&M University system. There's a lot of us, there's like 20 something universities, but anyway. I currently teach undergraduate and graduate courses in rhetoric and composition. I'm currently teaching a, well, all my courses are now online. Thank you, COVID-19. But I'm currently teaching an advanced nonfiction course for upper-level English students and or English majors, some non-majors, education majors, and it's cross-listed honors and non-honors, so I have some honors students in there, as well. And then, the other course I'm teaching is a graduate-level course. It's my first one. And I'm teaching composition studies, which is, really exciting cause it's like right in my area. And it's interesting to reread the field with students. My current research focus is on first-generation to college graduate students, in rhetoric and composition in particular and the ways they make meaning of their lives and their experiences and how those operate or go against or with academic expectations. And that work has been going on since I started my dissertation project, I think three years ago. Yeah. So I'm in, I'm just finishing up my first year as a faculty member.

**WF:** Yay! Congrats.

**AK:** Thank you. It's interesting.

**WF:** Well, we'd like to learn a little bit more about that. So thank you for joining us. We really appreciate you fitting us into your schedule. I know before the interview, we were all talking about just existing on Zoom. So thank you for being on Zoom a little bit more.

**AK:** Yeah!

**WF:** So we, like we said, we have a couple of questions for you. We'd like to begin with the first one, which is basically, how has the transition from being a grad student--maybe teaching, like any courses that you would be as a grad student-- how has that transition like moving over to grad faculty? Particularly with this graduate course that you're teaching and anything that carried over or anything that you'd like to share about that.

**AK:** Yeah, so speaking of like graduate courses specifically?

**WF:** Yeah!

**AK:** Yeah. Okay. So as a graduate student, I went to the University of Louisville where I did my PhD for context, and in my last year I was on fellowship. So actually I hadn't taught for a whole year until I came to Texas A&M-Commerce with the exception of summer teaching right before, which I did just to make money in the summer before this big move. and I was teaching in Louisville and living in Indiana. So I was also commuting and it was a very different experience. Louisville is a primarily white institution. It's a R1. Very different makeup in the population. Texas A&M-Commerce is an emerging HSI, Hispanic Serving Institution. So the population is much more diverse here in that makeup. And at Louisville, I had never taught a graduate course. I had only ever taken them. Right? And so my, experiences going into like teaching a graduate course very much built on taking what I already knew from the classes I had taken. and kind of piecing together, like what things did I like from different pedagogies? Similar to how I would approach an undergraduate class too, and looking at like different syllabi from colleagues, from friends, from my own experiences and updating them to what made sense for me. So for instance, in the course I'm teaching right now in composition studies, I was really interested in taking my, just my own interest in lifting up underrepresented voices and making sure that was threaded first in the course, like that came first for me, in my choices, in the books and the choices and the readings, and making sure that I emphasized those often underrepresented narratives of the field, and then also sprinkling in those "key pieces" that I would feel it would be an somewhat of an injustice not to have in there. And making sure that students knew that upfront as well, like this is important, and this reading of the field is one perception that we also need to take in there's so many ways we can understand this discipline. Also a thing that's primarily different is in my PhD program is it was entirely rhetoric and composition PhD students, whereas here, and master's was just general English, but here the masters and the PhD are across English disciplines. So, I have linguistics-focus students. I have literature-focus students, a couple of composition rhetoric, and then education. A lot of master's students are getting their graduate degree while they're teaching at local institutions or community colleges, just to gain more credibility or more, you know, experience in their field or in their training.

So it's a very different makeup in the population. So very quickly I learned about how much more distance-ed focused we are here versus in my PhD program, where everyone is, was expected to be a more-or-less a full-time PhD student on an assistantship also teaching. Whereas that is definitely not the case here, so that was really different. But it wasn't my, it wasn't the first time I'd experienced a population like that because of my master's at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, we had a similar, makeup with a little, a little bit of distance-ed mixed in. So I think that was an asset for me when I was, taking on this job interview. For instance, when they asked how I might teach an online graduate course, I was able to draw on those experiences. So yeah, I think that's, does that answer your question?

**WF:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah! That's, that's awesome. It's interesting that you were able to kind of apply that master's experience and bring it over to like post-PhD life.

**AK:** Yeah. Yeah, I've been drawing on that a lot this semester.

**WF:** That's very fortunate.

**AK:** Yeah. Very, very fortunate. Especially now, like given that we've moved entirely online. It was a little less intense with the graduate population than it was with the undergraduate. For me, at least.

**NR:** I'm sure your colleagues are more than happy that you're being able to bring in so much of your experience from your past, you know, then cultivating that in you. But I'm listening to a lot of, things that you're consciously trying to integrate, especially, you know, the diversity aspects or even the distance learning aspects, but you're consciously trying to make an effort to change some of the things. But do you have any the kind of mentorship at the new institution that you are introduce out? And could you talk a little bit about that?

**AK:** I am super lucky here in terms of having a very supportive department. But I feel like I've been welcomed with open arms, and I know that's not always everyone's experience, and I've been very fortunate. And I've been counting like thinking about that a lot recently, especially as we're all separated a bit, but the fact that we're still finding ways to connect via social media via Zoom, of course, phones, et cetera. And that's been. I don't know if that would have been the same experience elsewhere for me. In our composition and rhetoric portion of our, what we call it, a Literature and Languages department--we're not even technically an English department-- there's only three of us core faculty that do that work. And I'm the new one. So we have a fully tenured faculty member, another tenure-track professor, and then myself. And so the mentoring is, is set up in a way where we have a faculty member in our own departments. So the senior, rhet comp person is my faculty member. She's wonderful. Shannon Carter. And then, we have a college mentor as well, and I've only met with him once, but I have met with him once, which is a big deal to me. Cause I, cause it's nice to know that I have someone outside my own focus that I can connect with and they live kind of close. And if I have questions that were, that are broader than maybe something that I'm thinking in my own department at the university level is that, or I can reach out. I also feel like, and maybe this is because this institution is the smallest institution I've ever been at in my entire college experience. I was gone smaller. I feel like it's a lot easier to get in contact with people, not just in my own department, but also at the college level. So I feel already comfortable, say, emailing the dean with the question or something that--they've shown themselves to be very open to that kind of messaging in a way that I've never seen at another institution. But again, I think it's a product of a smaller institution. Those are some of the forms of mentoring, mentorship I've had. I have also have an excellent chair who does take time to like always thoroughly answer any questions I have and encourage those questions, which, I have found very, very, tension relieving in some ways. Cause I was always nervous. Like I'm going to have a million questions, but it's already been preempted. Like no, you're going to have a million questions. Go ahead and ask them has been brought up numerous times from colleagues, and everyone very graciously, always answers all my many, many questions.

**WF:** Nice. So I'm a little bit unfamiliar with the kinds of PhD students at Louisville. I actually know a couple. I know you were there and Chris, Chris. Or no, Chris?

**AK:** Oh, Chris Scheidler!

**WF:** Yeah, that's how you say his name! I don't want to mispronounce his name. I know him. But I just, I don't know, like what kind of PhD students are there. Are they like commuters? Are they like non-traditional in the sense that they're like have a career and they're just coming back and getting a PhD? Depending on like, what kind of group of PhD students who kind of came up with, how has that experience translated to the kinds of graduate students you work with at Texas A&M-Commerce?

**AK:** Yeah. So. I the way I would characterize graduate students at Louisville is that most of us are actually like 99% of us are full-time students there with assistantships, some with fellowships as well. And the fellowship model at Louisville is you have bookended fellowships. So you have a fellowship your first year and your last year, which is what I had. And then your middle--we have a four year program—your middle two years are teaching assistantships, right? And some folks go more than four years and that's cool. And they find other ways to get money, such as additional teaching assistantships or outside fellowships or that kind of thing. Yeah. So that's a little bit on the payment structure. So the types of like backgrounds, I was often, and this is still the case. I'm often always the youngest in every graduate program I've been in. Because I never took a break, so I like have gone, I went straight through my high school, bachelors, masters, PhD. Whereas, a lot of folks at Louisville had taken one or two years off, but very few where I would say completely non-traditional in the sense that they had a whole career break and then came back. A lot of folks were either like teaching elsewhere or community colleges, high schools, that kind of thing, and then came back. So to pursue usually with the goal of academic end goal, like the tenure-track professor life. Some exceptions and, you know, alternative academic life as well. But, that seemed to be the right normal population that I witnessed at least. And it seems to be getting slightly younger over the years, but, but that's, that's mostly what I've seen. Whereas here at Commerce, it is almost the reverse, maybe 10% of the population is like what Louisville was. And the majority of us here are non-traditional students. It's really interesting for me, especially, and I know my other tenure-track colleague, has mentioned this as well, that we tend to be younger than a lot of our students in our graduate classes. Since we both have, I've had very direct trajectories, whereas a lot of our students are, have been teaching for a while in their communities. at high school level community college level, or at lecturer level We're, and then, we're like the younger professor that they're having, it's, sometimes really interesting to like, navigate some of that, but I often forget how old anyone is anyway, but, but yeah, a lot more non-traditional students here, a lot of parents, yeah, that's been pretty different here. We did have some parents in our, in my graduate program at Louisville, but they were often on the younger side, whereas, you know, they were still doing, it was just kind of on the side sort of thing.

**WF:** Yeah. Just hearing you talk about Commerce reminded me of my experience as a master's student at Texas Tech, because I've always noticed that the PhD students there were like, this is the stuff that, what I'm doing on the side, I'm doing my PhD while I I'm like doing tech writing or I'm, or like managing this entire division of a business. So, I was always interested in the way that faculty kind of tailored the curriculum around those kinds of experiences. And I got that kind of by like osmosis just as the MA student sitting in with a bunch of PhD students. So I was just curious, like how that experience was between the two. So that sounds really cool. It sounds like you've gotten to experience like a wide breadth of different kind of graduate experiences and kind of bring all that to the table with this position. I'm sure that'd be super useful for other people who go into similar faculty positions. And by people, I mean, our listeners who are going into similar positions who might be dealing with a different graduate population that they've never really kind of experienced. So, yeah, that's really cool.

Just to pivot a little bit. We wanted to know a little bit about your work life balance. And what that looked like as a graduate student and how you transitioned that into this position. Could you talk to us a little bit about that?

**AK:** Yeah. Before I get too into that, I do want to like offer a little context, just a little like background context for like, how I'm thinking about this. So my first year at Texas A&M- Commerce is far from normal. I've been told this by several faculty members here, not just because of the current pandemic time that we're in. But also we've had two campus-related issues, one actually on campus, one in a nearby community that impacted our campus very directly. It was on our homecoming weekend, and those two moments have made the semester--both semesters--already very different. So we had a complete shift after for homecoming last year or last semester, where lots of mental health, it's a student population dropping, that sort of thing as expected. And of course, that also wears on the professors as well. And then same this semester where it was on campus and it was actually the same day that my first graduate seminar was supposed to run. So, that was very unexpected, and I will never forget my first day of graduate teaching in that respect. having a faculty or university-wide lockdown for several hours, sitting in our offices, navigating that. And then, learning later that unfortunately one of our first-year students had died in the shooting as a victim and, as well as her sister who was not a student, and the sister's daughter. So that's been really hard on our campus community, and knowing that, like, for instance, because we, in our discipline as first-year writing teachers in particular, see every first-year writing students some form or fashion, or know the teachers have them, right? It was really hard knowing that one of my own graduate students was the professor for that student. And then his entire class changed. It's, yeah, it's been really hard in that respect. So that was already not normal. And then, we were moving into spring break and it was almost like a respite, like, okay, well get a moment to slow down and catch up. It's it had been about a month since a month and a half since this year, but still like we're still all processing. We're all tired. And then COVID-19 has shown up. And I haven't seen my students since before spring break, and that's been pretty challenging. So, so already it's been a very, not, I don't think a normal by any means, in terms of like what it could have been, right? Like what might it have been projected in my brain, which is not like anything I ever experienced at Louisville, or any of my graduate programs. So that's, that's been interesting.

So, so I offer that context to say that my work life balance has been, has had to be very, very flexible, more so than ever before. Because I am very student centered, and so I will completely flip, I'm like I can put my stuff aside entirely and a 100% give my energy to students as much as possible. I find myself, especially now I'm looking at my online courses every single day and spending hours on them. If I, whatever time I do spend on my work. And not even touching my research at all, or very little if at all, it's happening in like really small chunks, kind of off to the side and I know that's completely fine at the current moment. And I think that the priority for me, that priority makes sense. so that's been a bit of a shift particularly right now. Going into it before things got unnormal, I guess the normal kind of went away, I had had established like a weekly writing check in with my faculty mentor. So I was, finding ways to devote time to research. And my faculty member was great at offering advice and just checking in, like, what projects are you working on? How can I be helpful giving you feedback when I needed it, or just giving me space to talk through an idea? Because one thing that I very much miss from grad school at school time is the writing center and having graduate friend colleagues that worked in the writing center that I could just like take my drafts to and be like help. I have, I'm just stuck in the middle of a day. Whereas, I don't see that the same thing here as a faculty member, I don't feel comfortable yet, going to a graduate student in the writing center and saying, "Hey, will you look at my work in your hours that you're working?" At least not yet, maybe, I don't know. It might change later, but that's been a big shift, in that kind of like writing accountability, but I'm really grateful that I have a faculty member of mentor who was like, what kind of stuff do you, how do you work? Because I work very differently than the other tenure-track faculty member. And I was like, okay, like community writing practices. So like writing groups, virtual check-ins, that sort of thing. I've been doing that for years. And so. Yeah. So that's been one way. I have balanced, like making sure I still get hit my research marks, toward, you know, taking those steps to our tenure that might not be happening otherwise because my teaching load is much more than I've ever experienced.

I have a3-3 load here. And my first year, I'm a 3-2, because I had negotiated one release, but, typically it's three, three, and I had a one 1-1 load in my PhD. So it's, it's very different in that regard. And it's a larger cap than I'm used to, though they did lower it recently, but that's been different. And since the population is much more working class first-generation here, I'm also being as flexible as I can as a teacher to offer, especially students since knowing that everyone has a second job, a space to do their work, productively in their own time. And yeah, and not focusing on those kinds of, you know, things that might slow down or hinder that work, but those are a couple ways I have been balancing life and work. Oh, one more. I thought of another one. I, since I came to life as a faculty member, I made a hard choice to try to keep my work work at campus or on campus. and when I come home, I try not to do so much work at all. And I try really hard to tell at least one day of the weekend off, which I don't think I ever truly did during my graduate program time. And I know that's like not easy for everyone and not everyone can do that, but I, yeah, like very consciously tried to do that, and I've found that to be very productive. And so what another ship that came with moving everything online and being at home regularly is that I had to. Readapt and go back to the way I used to work, which was almost always at home then kind of at a much slower pace. And so that's, that's been, that's been like a hiccup lately. but as we're entering into week four of quarantine teaching, it's getting a little more routine as being built in. And I think that's, what's been helpful.

**NR:** Yeah. It looks like, it all sounds fascinating to me because it sounds like there are some things which retain a life from the life of a graduate student. When you move on to a tenure track, there there's still the same, like writing and mentoring and all those sorts of things. But there are some big changes. There are some things that you can never be prepared for like the situations that we are in right now and the situations that, unfortunately, sorry that you had to face, but getting all of that like being exposed to all of that in the first year it must be quite a struggle. And I, yeah, I feel really sorry, but at the same time, you, just rise up as really strong and really prepared for what is to come. So it's just preparing you for the rest of their lives. I mean, in a way it's yeah, it's weird to start learning constantly. Based on how we can prepare for the future, what advice do you have for people who are on the job market? Cause obviously we can't prepare for everything, but there are some things that we can definitely do and learn from your experience. What are those things?

**AK:** That's a great first point. Prepare for the unexpected. For instance, my approach, let me back up, everyone has a different approach to the job market in the sense of knowing like what your needs are, what your wants are, what your dreams are, right? Some folks go and they apply to every single job they see. Some folks are more strategic than that. Right? And some folks are less like, maybe less strategic or more focused on like a particular type of institution or something like that. So my approach was my dream was like tenure-track position, ideally at a research-focused institution, though teaching focus is great. And I was interested in bigger colleges, so not liberal arts colleges, not, smaller communities. But like I always had a big college space, like football colleges have been my, my, background entirely. I went to Alabama then Nebraska and then Louisville. So entirely red and white football schools were like my jam. So I wanted that kind of a campus community where like, it was very lively. It was kind of then by, multiple different organizations and, interests and had a lot of school spirit type of focus. If that makes sense. Because that's what I knew. And that's where I felt comfortable. and diversity was extra important to me as well. I'm a woman of color. I'm a first-generation student. I'm a child of immigrants. I wanted to be at a place where that all those identities and more were welcome, that I could like work with students that are like me, in some ways, but also support the future of whatever that's going to be. Right. So those things were all important. With that said, I was also very locationally, interested, because of where my family's located, because I have a husband, if you have a spouse that changes some of the ways your market experience goes for sure. And I have two cats and like, you know, there are certain things I wanted to make sure were in place just for my own personal health, my personal living in my future, like to be happy. Right. So after I made those, like, it's so important just to assess where you are first. I, that would be a piece of advice I offer Assess where you are and think about like what's really possible. And, and you'll get experience of course, that you can use jobs to leverage offers, so you should apply to everything. And, and while that advice is not wrong or anything, it's not always feasible to apply to everything. especially if you're, we are bound by certain, you know, things right.

Second, in terms of job market, if you are also working on your dissertation during that time, don't forget to prioritize your dissertation as well, because jobs or not, that has to get done. and. You will have the doctorate one way or another, because you it's even harder if that's not done, like it's only going to get easier the more you get done of your dissertation. And I, and I say that from experience, as I got my chapters closer to complete, I found my job market stress was a little lower. Just knowing that even at the end, I would still have a higher degree than I had when I started in the job market. So I could at least keep applying if I need it to over the summer or something. So that's, that's another point I wanted to make. And then, this is not necessarily my last point, but yeah. Do you be prepared for that unexpected. I never, I never imagined I would live in Texas. It was actually on my dude. One of my do-not-apply states. I had made a list of like a shortlist of states and I was like, not because I have anything against them, the states, but they just weren't realistic in my brain of where to live or the types of institutions that I wanted. And I didn't see myself in Texas at all. It's a minimum eight-hour drive to my parents for instance. And that seems still really far to me. And, and I'll, and I can say like why I ended up here, why I chose here. But, yeah, I think, I think just be prepared for those unexpected moments when a job call comes out and it is your dissertation topic rewritten in job form. And that's what happened in this case. So I saw the Commerce job ad, and I had several friend colleagues, et cetera, send it to me, including my dissertation advisor. And they were just like, you have to apply to this. It's like whether or not you take the job. Okay. But apply to this position because they are asking for your work here. They're looking for someone who's invested in graduate students and first-generation populations. it's an emerging HSI. It's this kind of institution working class, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. All the key words for my project, for my research and my genuine interests. And so I had to apply, and I did. And it, that immediately as even during the interview, it's just those feelings start to you start to feel like connections in a way where like, okay, I need this. This is the place I want to be. And as those things started to fall into place, it became more and more affirmed, which was really nice. and it's been continued to be affirmed.

So I think there's just something about which I guess would be my biggest piece of advice is trust your gut. if you have a feeling about something you're probably right. You know, yourself better than anyone, so trust your gut and know that the things will fall into place when they do. And for some of us, it takes longer. Like I accepted my job. And defending my dissertation within five days of one another. It all happened. It was like the wildest week of my life. So, so it can happen very late in the game, which for me, it was, that was April last year, almost exactly a year ago. It's kind of wild. And those things, they take time and that requires a lot of patience. So that whole metaphor of the job market being a roller coaster is absolutely true. You'll have your up weeks, your down weeks where you hear absolutely nothing, and then suddenly the roller coaster goes very, very fast and it ends ideally. And hopefully you end up where you are happy, but just know that it's also not the end of the job market forever. You can always go back if you want to. Right. Yeah. I don't know if those are helpful, but those are a couple pieces of advice.

**WF:** No. Yeah. I think the main idea of just trusting your instincts and not trusting the process, but knowing that it is a process and that it'll reach its conclusion eventually one way or the other. I mean that in and of itself, I think is really valuable to me because I get really anxious when I have to wait for things. So just knowing that there's going to be ups and I can't, I shouldn't use my hand motions. Nobody's going to see this, but no, there's going to be ups and downs. I think that's valuable for me just to say, okay, you know what? Chill out. It's going to be fine. Maybe. We'll see.

**AK:** I was going to say, I do have like one, I guess, self-care piece of advice, that can, that was really helpful for me. Having those like systems in place where you have like, I dunno, mini rewards or something that helps you, move through each week, so it doesn't feel like you're aimlessly applying to jobs and working on your dissertation and not doing anything else and/or teaching if you're teaching, that helps you just kind of continue to be a human as well. So I found, hobbies to be helpful, video games, cross stitching, cooking, that kind of thing. Those are things I like to do. But then also having like communities that you can reach out to. Cause it's, it can be very hard to talk to family, for instance, when you're on the job market, because the number one question you'll probably get is, "Did you get a job yet?" Or, "How has the, is your process going?" That kind of thing. And you don't want to talk about it because you don't want to talk about it. it's just, it's hard and it's, it can sometimes make you want to distance yourself from anyone that might ask those questions. So like finding the folks that you can just be yourself and chill with, for a bit, or having like, tell, like for instance, my partner would make sure we would get out regularly so that I could just like, not be it. I was on fellowships. I was at home constantly. It's easy to get into a rut of checking your email at home, whereas like going out and getting into nature or doing something just away, it was very, very helpful. And just knowing that there were like certain people I could text during the day that were also on the job market and going through the same experience. For instance, it was really helpful and just like my mental health, and, and, you know, keeping, okay. It's touch with my therapist, et cetera, et cetera. I think those things just having those in place is just so important. Like the certain things you can count on each week, Yeah.

**NR:** That's, that's actually a great note to end that you know how to achieve self-care. So, this was, this was great, Ashanka, and I love that you put it like point by point. And one of the things that, you know, just the fear of the unknown, which is already like instilled in all of us, but thinking about it as, not just a fear, but also an opportunity sometimes, you know, like speaking about Texas and how it all just really worked out for you. That, that just makes me feel much better about the way I think about things and the anxiety that it creates. So thanks for sharing that with us. It was really helpful.

**AK:** Yeah. Yeah. Thank you.

**WF:** Can I add something a little unrelated, but it's funny because when you said we're eight hours away, as a Texan, I know that we measure things, not in miles, but in hours. So you're, you're becoming Texan-ized.

**AK:** [laughter] Absolutely.

**WF:** Well, thanks again. We really appreciated, Is there any, are there any social media links or anything that you'd like to share? Or like LinkedIn or a Facebook?

**AK:** Yeah. all my social media is @LitaStarr, L-I-T-A-S-T-A-R-R. I do have a LinkedIn somewhere. I don't know when the last time I've used it though. And, I do have a personal website. It's just my first name, last name, dot com. So yeah, those are just. Yeah. Yeah. So that's, that's about it.

**WF:** Yeah. We'll link everything in the show notes so people can find you.

**AK:** Thank you both so much.

**WF:** Yeah. Thank you!

[piano music plays and fades out]