

# Chapter 6. El Poder de la Amistad: Leaning into Friendship During Shifts in Positionality

Kristine Acosta

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

*¿Qué hago aquí? Debo de estar ayudando a mi mamá con mi abuelito. Debo de estar ayudando a mi esposo con la casa. Los otros estudiantes no entienden lo muerta que estoy del cansancio después de haber terminado mis dos trabajos para poder pagar los estudios. No pueden entender el sacrificio de nada más estar presente para esta clase.*

It was my very first presentation for my first course as a PhD student in Technical Communication and Rhetoric. I remember that in three weeks of classes, I had barely mustered up the courage to contribute to discussions. I felt like an outsider. Completely lost. Completely out of place. No one in my family had completed higher education before. No one understood academia or could offer guidance on what to expect. I was sinking but couldn't allow myself to give up.

*¿Qué pensarían mis abuelitos si abandono esta oportunidad? Ellos no sacrificaron todo para que yo no siguiera. No me puedo quedar callada.*

Everyone else in class had already presented and the professor had forgotten to call on me. Now was my only chance to speak up. I couldn't lose out on credit for my work. I couldn't let myself down. I couldn't let my family down.

*Que desastre. Como me temblaba la voz. No tuve ritmo ni claridad. Ya no puedo más. Esto no es para mí. Lo intente, pero el doctorado no es para mí.*

Then, as if the presentation disaster of the century wasn't bad enough, the professor vocalized an even bigger nightmare: a group project. If I wasn't sure before, I was sure now. There was no way I'd be able to complete this.

*¿Quién va a querer trabajar conmigo? Ellos ni se acuerdan de que soy parte de la clase.*

After trying, and failing, to secure a partner three different times through the Zoom chat, I was defeated. One person hadn't even responded to my direct message. This was a sign that someone like me just wasn't cut out for a PhD. I should just stay in my lane and continue working as a teacher.

*Yo sabía que esta gente no iban a querer trabajar conmigo. Yo sabía que todos iban a decir que no.*

Fifteen minutes left of class. I remember thinking I'll just tell the professor I plan on leaving the program. That will get me out of this project and get me out of this terrible experiment. Turns out, Manny had different plans. The missing response on the chat finally got back to me and said I could join him and his

partner on a group of three. Finally, another student to connect with. Someone who gave me a chance.

*Bueno, no puedo dar marcha atrás ahora. Ya tengo que trabajar con Manny. No lo puedo embarcar. Pa' lante. A hacer el mejor trabajo que pueda y seguir. No me queda de otra.*

Manny didn't just split up tasks for the project; although this would have been the easiest way to approach our work. He took the time to get to know me, asked how I was doing, and helped me navigate this strange new world I had come into all at once. He became more than a classmate or groupmate. He became a friend.

*Con un nuevo amigo, ya no me siento tan sola. Tengo comunidad. Tengo apoyo. Tengo a alguien con quien puedo hablar.*

Manny introduced me to Delphine and Jess. Soon I met Andrew. Then came Kathleen who introduced me to Kim. We became a tight knit circle. The TCR (Technical Communication and Rhetoric) Fam.

*Son muy buena gente. Me siento bien en su compañía. Por lo menos puedo tomar clases con personas que me caen bien.*

~ ~ ~

Though this doctoral program consisted mostly of online synchronous classes, there was also an in-person residency requirement that had graduate students take courses on-campus while participating in professional development opportunities.

*¿Y qué pasa si no nos llevamos igual en persona como nos llevamos virtualmente? ¿Qué pasa si no les caigo bien en persona? ¿Qué pasa si nos sentimos muy extraños después de conocernos?*

When heading to campus for the first time, I was nervous about being away from family, in a new state with new people I only really knew online. I wondered again, if this was a mistake. Whether I was in over my head and inconveniencing my family unnecessarily.

*¿Soy egoísta por dejar a todos mis seres queridos cuando tanto está pasando en nuestras vidas?*

Thankfully, once the TCR Fam picked me up from my hotel for the first time, all my fears went away. We laughed and cracked jokes just like we did over text and video. We comfortably shared stories and experiences. Nothing was forced. Everything was easy. Feeling like I belonged made going to class and participating enjoyable. It gave me the confidence to share who I was and what I knew with others. In time, this academic journey didn't seem so scary anymore. I was so thankful for the opportunity to experience friendships and learning in both online and physical spaces.

*Qué bello es poder compartir mi vida real con mi vida académica. Es algo totalmente especial.*

~ ~ ~

It was nice to have a group of people to rely on. A group of people with a group chat during class. People I could go to for advice on schoolwork or the dissertation process or what the heck to do post-graduation.

*Por lo menos durante el programa, tendré personas en quien confiar.*

I thought that this friendship existed in a PhD student bubble where we leaned on each other to get through coursework and requirements. It was not until my grandfather passed away that I realized this was so much more.

*¿Y ahora quien va a celebrar los juegos de futbol conmigo? ¿Quién me va a contar historias de Cuba y España? ¿Quién me va a reforzar el valor de nuestra cultura e historia?*

I was devastated and left with little strength to go through the motions of getting work done. I couldn't bring myself to go to class. The TCR Fam did more than just send me notes on what I missed; they sent me a handwritten letter:

Dear Kristine,

El amor de la familia es para siempre. So sorry to hear about the loss of your grandfather. We hope you find some comfort in your memories of him, and of the fierce love your family has for him, now and forever. Your TCR fam is here for anything you need from afar.

Love,

The TCR Fam

*Que belleza. Estos sí son verdaderos amigos.*

~ ~ ~

What started as a friendship during school became a friendship for life. The TCR Fam became a constant for me. There wasn't a day that went by where we weren't talking to one another.

*¿Como puedo conseguir experiencia como instructora en una universidad si no me puedo ir de mi trabajo de maestra?*

Andrew and Manny let me know when they saw openings for first year writing positions and helped me gain a sense of how to apply to openings in academia. Kathleen, Kim, and Delphine helped me with how to structure assignments and manage my classes once I was hired as an adjunct. Every step of the way, their friendship not only guided me through new beginnings but also reassured me that I could succeed in the opportunities I was given.

*La confianza que me creen en migo misma es extraordinaria y me llena de certitud que todo va a salir bien.*

~ ~ ~

When I was offered my first full-time position as a professor at a major university, there was no question about who I'd tell first: my TCR Fam. They reassured me I was ready for this role and celebrated every milestone, question, and success I had.

*¿Yo sé que ellos me pueden apoyar en todo, pero me podrán ayudar durante este tiempo?*

After a year at my dream job at my dream university, my husband and I decided it was time to start having a family. Month after month we waited. Month after month the dreaded two words on the at-home test: *Not Pregnant*. We finally met with a specialist who confirmed what we already knew—we had an uphill battle with infertility.

*Me da pena de hablar de esto con mi familia. No sé ni como decírselo a mis amigos. Mi cuerpo me ha fallado y no se ni como seguir en el día a día, en el trabajo, en todo.*

My husband and I became enmeshed in a never-ending cycle of IUI protocols and fertility acupuncture. Four times we thought we'd finally do it; we'd finally get our break. Each time our doctor called, we became more devastated than the last.

*Me siento un esqueleto. Menos que una persona. Solo yendo por los pasos.*

Without me having to say much, my friends knew something was wrong. I wasn't answering text messages like I always did. Wasn't initiating conversations. When I finally shared my infertility struggles, the TCR Fam was there like never before and rooted for me when I started IVF.

*No debo de dudar su apoyo. Siempre están aquí y siempre están a mi lado a pesar de la distancia.*

Manny and Andrew were great about advice on how to handle the pressures of work-life balance, especially during trying times. Jess sent me a care package of items that would help make the IVF procedure more comfortable. Kathleen made time to visit me during the summer when I really needed a friend. And Kim and Delphine constantly checked in and let me know they were thinking of me and wishing me well.

*Nunca sola. Siempre conmigo.*

~ ~ ~

Though IVF was unsuccessful, I was reminded of the fact that a lot of life is filled with disappointment. There are lots of lows before you can reach the highs and things hardly ever work out the way we plan. The trick to getting through it all is never taking your support system for granted. The friendship provided to me by the TCR Fam has been my saving grace as not only a scholar and academic but also as a human being.

*Ahora conozco el inmenso valor que tiene la amistad y comprendo la fuerza que te dan estas relaciones. Han habido tantas veces cuando dude en migo misma y mis*

*amistades me han ayudado a superar los momentos más difíciles de la vida. Ellos me conocen como persona y ven lo bueno dentro de mí.*

When going to school or pursuing a career in academia, it becomes important to find a group of people you can trust. Leaning into that friendship and being there for others has made me a better person. In life, we will always be faced with shifting positions and circumstances. Friendships stay with us through these shifts and are sounding boards during times of uncertainty.

*La fortaleza de la amistad es algo único. Es algo que siempre debemos buscar y regalar para que crezca y siga mejorando el mundo.*

~ ~ ~

As an early-career academic navigating professional expectations, making new friendships was not at the top of my list of things to do. I wanted to make sure my courses were well-designed, that I had joined enough committees to fulfill my service requirement, that I was well-informed of university policies and procedures. Plus, I already had the TCR Fam and childhood friends. There was no need, and no time, for any more. Or so I thought.

*Tengo que asegurarme que salgue bien en las evaluaciones de los estudiantes y de mis administradores al fin del año. Nada más importa. Lo que tenga que hacer para recibir buen resultado, lo hare. Me quiero quedar en esta universidad para siempre. No quiero que nada afecte mis sueños y objetivos.*

A couple months into my first fall semester teaching full-time at the university level, I felt I had great connections with my students but somehow felt out of place in my own department. I never really saw anyone in their offices around campus. Never bumped into anyone outside of mandatory program or department meetings. I just found myself going to class, running office hours, going back to class to finish teaching, and going home. More often than not, I felt isolated. I felt alone.

*¿Esto es normal? Le pregunte al TCR Fam. Todos empezaron a reírse y me dijeron que al principio se demora aclimatar a un nuevo departamento y a un nuevo grupo de personas. Me aseguraron que me ofrecieron la posición porque me merecía estar en la universidad. En tiempo encontraras tu grupito del trabajo, me declararon. Solo debería tener un poquito de fe.*

With a bit of reassurance from the TCR Fam, I became more vocal at meetings, making sure my insights were shared and valued. The TCR Fam's encouragement was always in the back of my head. I just had to be myself. I'd find a new circle, but I had to put in a little effort first.

*Hablando me cuesta muchísimo. No quiero decir algo que me vaya a hacer quedar mal. No sé si voy a sonar suficiente inteligente. ¿Qué pasa si no les caigo bien a los compañeros del trabajo?*

I worked on projects and initiatives that were important to me and my research interests. Slowly but surely, I started talking to more people in the department

and started seeing certain faculty more often than others. When I was first invited to coffee outside of a work meeting, I almost jumped for joy.

*No lo puedo creer. Alguien del trabajo quiere compartir conmigo fuera de las obligaciones de enseñar o servir al departamento.*

That first cup of iced coffee did more than just quench my thirst. It fulfilled my need for community. By talking to my colleague outside of work, I found that while we did discuss work and our departmental roles, we also shared insights about who we were outside of academia. Hobbies, upbringings, favorite foods. We took time to get to know one another.

*¿Esto será el inicio de una nueva amistad?*

~ ~ ~

Eventually, there were multiple coffee invites and lunches to attend with colleagues. One work friend introduced me to their own work friends and soon, I found my circle at work quickly growing in number. I now had people who I could go to for advice and clarification. I didn't have to text my TCR Fam about every little question I had about teaching or academia. Once again, I'd found my people. It took some time, but I felt that maybe, just maybe, academia was really for me. That I could really have a place here. Maybe I really did fit in after all.

*Me siento tan agradecida de sentirme querida en el trabajo. Nunca imaginaria tener tan buenas conexiones en la universidad. Nunca pensaba que necesitaba tener amistades en el trabajo, pero ahora que las tengo, estoy segura de que no podría seguir sin ellas.*

In time, conversations and projects with colleagues turned into conference presentations and publications. Faculty I had initially only viewed as representatives of the university I worked for, embraced me and invited me to join them in representing our institution's mission and vision.

*Estoy en casa. Aquí puedo ayudar a mis compañeros, estudiantes, y comunidad.*

~ ~ ~

While the TCR Fam did not find my work friends for me, they did show me what it meant to be a friend. They taught me what it meant to be there for other human-beings and how it always pays to be kind. They taught me that no one should ever feel alone, and that community is never too far away, if you only know where to look for it.

*Ellos me han convertido en mejor persona. Mejor profesora. Mejor compañera. Mejor amiga.*

I carry the lessons taught to me by the TCR Fam everywhere I go. Whenever a new colleague comes to the department, I strive to make them feel welcome. I work hard to make my classroom a community for all students—where connections are encouraged and celebrated. At the end of the day, no matter what position we hold, or where we might find ourselves in life, we can always use a friend.

*El poder de la amistad nos llena de amor y conexión. Su apoyo, para siempre, nuestra guía.*