

Episode 60: Alexandria Lockett

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, I talk with Alexandria Lockett about Spelman College, a private liberal arts Historically Black College and University (HBCU) for women, the racial, gendered, and technological politics of digital labor, and how HBCUs are situated in rhetoric and composition.

Alexandria Lockett is an Assistant Professor of English at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. She deeply enjoys serving the oldest historically Black college for women and is committed to teaching and learning about the creative, economic, and emotional challenges to thriving and surviving in the 21st century. At Spelman, her primary goals are to strengthen Spelman's writing cultures by increasing the visibility and impact of public and professional writing at HBCUs. Thus, she has occupied three major leadership roles affiliated with Spelman's Comprehensive Writing Program (CWP), which include serving as chair of the First-Year Writing committee (2014-2016), co-chair of the Writing-Intensive initiative (2016-2018), as well as serving on the Writing-Intensive Checklist Committee (2016-present) and the SpelFolio Assessment Jury (2014-present). Her work has appeared in *Composition Studies*, *Enculturation*, and *Praxis*, as well as in several chapters in edited collections.

Alexandria, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Spelman College is a small private, liberal arts Historically Black College and University (HBCU) for women in Atlanta, Ga. It's the oldest one of only two HBCU women's colleges in the U.S. Talk to me about Spelman College and what it's like to teach there?

AL: Excited to talk about HBCUs within the context of rhetoric composition and literacy and writing studies, because we tend to be very marginalized when we're talking about the formation of composition programs, pedagogical practices and the history of the field in general. I want to start off by saying it's quite an honor to be at Spelman because the history of writing at Spelman is really quite fascinating. Jacqueline Jones Royster, who's one of the vets and OGs in the field, she started our program as a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program.

And what's really fascinating about the history of our program at Spelman and why it is so interesting to teach here is because it started off in...Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, she's one of the formidable Black feminist thinkers of our time, historian of Black women's work. She's done numerous anthologies with Black woman writers of all kinds, whether they were critics or whether they were creative writers or whatever, she's cataloged exhaustively. And she also runs our women's research and research center here at Spelman, but actually started in her office.

The writing program started in a women's research and resource space. It's kind of intriguing to kind of imagine that our writing program could emerge from that situation, as opposed to say a lot of writing programs, which emerged from desegregation mandates for remedial writing

programs to get Black people “acculturated” into White institutions. That's the first thing is I think having that history of writing at Spelman is kind of cool because we are a small college. We do have a comp requirement. It's one semester, it used to be two, but they eliminated the stretch component because we also have a course here at Spelman called ADW, African Diaspora in the World, which is a two semester sequence, which is intended to be a kind of decolonial historic...it's kind of like instead of Western Civ, we have ADW, which sort of destroys the idea of having Western Civ.

At best those courses can work really well with composition to kind of give students a sense of intellectual ownership that is not rooted in a kind of replication of a traditional, “Okay, here's the academic conventions and the standards, let's get to it,” type of approach. We don't have an official first-year writing program, which believe it or not can be a good thing. It does lend itself to a kind of customized education that the students can really take with them based on their instructors.

I think in an HBCU space writing instruction becomes very peculiar and interesting because your students are overwhelmingly...Elaine Richardson's “To Protect and Serve” is a great article that I actually assign to my students as a way to get them to start thinking about their own literacies. If they're at Spelman College, they're not there because they were some kind of fist in the air resistant student, they're there because they are the best of the best. They followed all the rules, they did everything right and now they want you to help them keep doing everything right.

Okay, I'm a Black woman. They're a Black woman. I always ask them the same question I asked my students at PWIs, am I the first, not even am I the first I don't frame it that way, I say, "Have you ever had a Black teacher at any grade level, regardless of gender?" The overwhelming answer, 95.5% of the time is “No, you are the first. I came to Spelman because I have a legacy of parents who said, ‘This is where I would learn my Black history.’”

The problem with the marginalization of HBCU scholars in the field is there's a lot of assumptions about who this Black student is that we're teaching. And a Black student that I'm teaching at Spelman College is not going to be a Black student I'm teaching at Penn State or OU. The joy of being in an HBCU is the pedagogical challenge of not being in a situation where I'm trying to model my students to be a particular citizen, but that I'm actually in a position where I can help somebody retrace their literacy and their ownership of literacy and say, “What kind of freedom do you want to have for yourself?” And as a Black woman, the most radical thing I can teach you is how to say no.

SW: What do you teach, and how do students respond to this kind of approach?

AL: Well, I teach honors composition and some semesters it's just fantastic and then some semesters it's terrible. Like any institution, I don't care what kind of institution it is, honors students tend to come into that classroom having felt like they've arrived and they're ready to do the work, which is a great frame, except when you're saying, "Hey, the way that you think about writing is not really going to help you." And they panic real quick or they realize they don't have experience with writing they thought they had or their attitude towards communication is they

realize how inherently performative and White it is. And it's what they do with that realization that will make or break my class.

Let me tell you about my class and let me tell you a little bit about the structure. I've developed a structure for honors composition after much tinkering and here's what works for me. I spend the first half of the class talking to them about what does being an intellectual mean? What does it mean that we don't associate Black women with the term intellectual? We start off with Toni Morrison's *The Site of Memory* where she talks about how her composition process is informed by this kind of absence. She tends to be categorized as a fiction writer, but clearly she's drawing on an autobiographical writing tradition which she traces to the slave narrative. And she says, "Well, the formerly enslaved, when they were writing their narratives, they had to leave out certain things, the sordid details of slavery, we really don't get a lot from the slave narratives and imagine how much sort of detail we do get."

But Morrison calls that a veil. She says these writers had to write with a veil because they had a very particular rhetorical purpose...it was to get these White readers, predominantly White readership to see them in their humanity using Christian appeals overwhelmingly. But for Morrison as a writer, it's that veil that she wants to pull back as a writer to say, "What kinds of creative resources in the world did these people have to make these narratives in that time and to own their literacy and to wield their literacy in such a way that the writing could be as impactful as it is?" When they see Morrison talking about her process in such a clear way, it's a great piece because they start to wonder, what is a Black literary tradition? How do we write? What is the purpose of writing? And what is truth? What are facts?

Because Morrison goes into all the philosophical quarries, like she makes at one point a claim that says, "Facts can exist independent of human beings. Truth cannot." What's our charge as writers? Basically is what I love that piece for. And then we read Jacqueline Jones Royster's perspectives on the intellectual tradition of Black women. And Royster, of course, in her very incisive writing style just sort of schools you. You don't think about Black women when you think about being intellectual. You don't even know who Black women writers are. And she of course introduces us to this scope of Black women writers. They also read the introduction to Shirley Wilson Logan's *With Pen and Voice* and the introduction to the 18 volumes of 19th century Black women writers in the Schomburg's Collection of *The Pen is Ours*, written by Skip Gates.

My students start to realize very quickly, they don't know nothing about Black women writers and they're at Spelman College and they're Black women. It's kind of like, I don't have to teach, they get to see it for themselves when they're reading about it for themselves. That starts to motivate them to start thinking about their literacy. I give them writing prompts. Some of them are simple and could be applied to any classroom space. Tell me about the text in your home because I'm trying to introduce them to narrative writing. Not that narrative is...because they do associate narrative with fiction and creative writing only, and then there's academic writing only. I need to disrupt that for them just like Morrison disrupts the boundaries of being an autobiographical or fiction writer. I actually have them read about genre, that all over the world, genre is not categorized like we categorize genre. Fiction is very much a market tool that we use and it was an invention of the novel so we get into that.

Where we go with that is I ask them the question, I say, "Tell me, describe a scene," to get them into showing and not telling. Tell me about the text in your home that you grew up around. Did you have bookcases? Magazines? Whatever that means. Then they start to kind of realize, "Huh, we only had this one little bookcase" or "We had a whole, my parents are professors, so we had tons of books, but I didn't like those books." Or whatever. Second part to that question, when was the first time you ever independently, not in a classroom, not by your parents, when's the first time you independently pursued and read a text written by a Black woman? When they answer those two questions, something kind of happens.

SW: Your teaching and research interests focus on issues like the racial, gendered, and technological politics of digital labor, "big" data, surveillance, and knowledge equity. Do you mind talking more about the kinds of questions and frameworks that have informed your past and current projects?

AL: Really all my research kind of boils down to really a simple question. This includes whether we're talking about the work that I did on my thesis as a Master's student on blues women, because I wrote about the rhetorical significance of the lyrics and performances of blues women. My dissertation was on information leaks, leaks as a literal and figurative expression of system failure in the 21st century and some ways we need to revisit old technologies to better understand some of the racial and cultural conflicts that have informed civil rights. Really in that project, I was trying to connect hacktivism and civil rights in a very strategic way through information leaks and the rise of "big" data. The work I've published seems to deviate from those projects, but it doesn't. I published on digital labor, in particular, looking at how Black women coming back to that pedagogy have historically had to do the labor of representation, that against negative stereotyping, against negative messaging against Black people, we have always had to engage in new technologies, contrary to the narratives that are here to represent ourselves.

One of the biggest findings that informs my work and this question I'll get to, there's a politics of knowledge production. That all roads to my research leads to this question, who feels free to produce knowledge in a culture? And how are they able to circulate it? And whose knowledges are marginalized? And where do they have to circulate those knowledges? And how is it that we always end up back to Martin Luther King Jr's *World House*? It is the most taboo knowledge that ends up becoming commodified in the mainstream anyway, because we're utilizing networked global technologies that make it unavoidable to avoid each other, even as our social practices and even to some extent, our legal ones literally segregate us.

All of my research is about that problem and how if we don't open information and we don't start to really critically think about things like, what does it mean to be deterritorialized, desegregated, decolonialized, all of these great things that we talk about all the time mean nothing to me if we do not have a populace that feels free to produce knowledge. Now I'm not talking about free to produce information. I think that's where academia has failed to develop a clear messaging and a clear vision that we can all adapt regardless of our institutional types. And that's why I edit with Wikipedia because despite the homogeneity with Wikipedia and the vilification of Wikipedia by academia, because it's threatened obviously by a distributed system of knowledge-making that doesn't involve the gatekeeping it's used to. It's the fact that anyone can edit. That openness, and

that there's a philosophy of open source that we're all being indoctrinated into and subjectively being introduced to through the technologies we use. Ask anybody, they expect information to be free, even if they don't practice that principle.

Education has to come back to the central question, which is “Okay, well, what is our purpose?” Every discipline has a responsibility to teach how it produces knowledge. Carry it. If it's not explicit with students about that, it's not doing its job right now. What my students get from my classes and what I make sure I do in my research is address these questions of what is our capacity for knowledge production? Who's doing it? How does that affect everybody else's capacity to do it? Well, if I'm a biologist, I need to be able to tell you over time, what has affected our ability to produce knowledge? And by knowledge I mean, what is the narrative of how we arrive at the conclusion? And how do we design literacy experiments and experiences in ways that allow for us to draw meaningful conclusions about what could possibly be true?

Not the truth, objective truth, non-biased, White male, one great man, one great time, one great event type truth, but real knowledge because when we start to reframe it and we start to really understand that this is an effort of collective intelligence now, we have the technologies and the capacities to truly produce interdisciplinary, globally connected, distributed, diverse knowledge like we never, ever created it in human history. It's there. The potential is there.

SW: What is your sense of how Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are situated in rhetoric and composition, and literacy and writing studies? What kind of work, historically and at present, is being done by HBCU teacher-scholars in the field? And how does considering this work affect the way the field produces knowledge?

AL: Well, we have been continuously producing scholarship, but it's very marginalized and it's very little if you look at the scope of production. I think there's a lot of reasons for this. Number one, just sheer segregation in terms of, how should I put it? I think we have to come back to the National Education Defense Act and really the growth of sort of English programs. We have to also look at the increase of your bureaucratic institutions that happened at the turn of the century. We have to look into democratization of higher education. Then we have to look at the desegregation of higher education. All these major factors, legislatively and socially and culturally and technologically, led to a place where the writing program emerged. And by the writing program, we're talking about whether it was the required mandated writing course because literally Harvard men couldn't write in the 19th century.

I'm sure you're familiar with a lot of the scholarship about that and some of the narratives about the Boylston chair of rhetoric and what was going on with rhetoric and the emergency opposition at that institution, when they're meant...they're lettered, cultured men failed miserably on basic standard tests. Even as we will attribute that failure to people of color entering White schools. I would say that the history of the emergence of writing programs and its connected to racial segregation and desegregation mandates you won't see that in Berlin's history. You won't see that in Harris' history. You won't see that in a lot of people's history of the field, because the scholars who came to write the histories of the field for whatever reason, the writing course as a requirement has been a consistent thing since the 19th century across all institutions, first of all.

But suddenly remedial education and how that was supposed to make up for the deficient students who were coming to college, I'm looking particularly at the sixties.

They were built off the backs of these Black students who were just trying to get ahead and try to get a chance. And a lot of these White scholars who participated in that unknowingly, who literally saw an opportunity, they professionalized composition studies off of this context. Writing wasn't something that they learned in a class. Hell, writing wasn't something I learned in a class. I was one of those people who didn't have to do it and look at me teaching it. I have to always confront that, too. I didn't go through what they're going through. I'm building a class that I never had to take. How many of us practitioners are in that situation, Shane? And imagine the ones who started this shit in the sixties and the seventies. You know they were in that position.

I think a lot of what we see in the scam of rhetoric and composition is at a certain point, people realize, I think it was the nineties when they really didn't have a lot of scrutiny, because you got to realize, once the nineties is over and we get these camera technologies in our lives and internet becomes more widespread, the fraud becomes more apparent. It's easier to gatekeep in the silent silos of a reproduction of self that is largely not scrutinized because you are doing something "for the college." You've got these, let's run these writing programs...think about how sharp those divisions between literary studies and English studies and writing studies used to be because let's be clear, English studies is relatively new as well. And when it started, it didn't start in some kind of a scheme. It started, it was like, "Oh my God, what do you mean you want to study Mark Twain? That's terrible." Yeah, that was a controversy, too.

It's interesting to note that the best thing about rhetoric and composition is that we are one of the only disciplines I know of that historicizes itself. That's pretty fucking cool. On the other hand, it is also, when I talk about the scam of rhetoric and composition, there is a kind of competition in this field to be recognized. And there's an insecurity about visibility and recognition that leads to the coinage of terms and the barring and appropriation of knowledges from other disciplines without an acknowledgement of interdisciplinarity, that then leads to a kind of reproduction of a discipline that is really empty and shallow because let's be clear, the people who professionalized composition in the seventies, they were not, there was no composition studies, so these people were making it as they were going along as an administrative duty to run writing programs. And the democratization of education led the institutions to see writing programs as a stop gap for that average student to acclimate and assimilate into the college because college and universities have still failed to define themselves after desegregation.

HBCUs all the while have been doing what HBCUs do, educating our people the best way that we know how. And we definitely can say that the programming in our institutions is diverse. And when we start trying to borrow from the "mainstream institutions," it doesn't quite work as well because our students are very much about that practical education. They want to know what is going to help me in this next class? What is going to help me get into grad school? What is going to help me? Now I'm not saying the way it's taught is always as progressive as the field would imagine. It's no surprise that we're marginalized within the field, but it's kind of surprising when you see this marginalization alongside this sort of social justice in the classroom, antiracists, let's teach our students to be woke citizens.

Well, that's really hard to do when a lot of your Black scholars, if you have any Black scholars, because as you noticed our conferences are White, White, Whitivity, White, White, White. Why would Black people want to be part of a profession that has little opportunity for growth, very little pay, very little recognition, a reproduction of White supremacy with little financial reward and no power for you anywhere? My sense of HBCUs is that we are marginalized, but with everybody's attention on race, with everything hitting a fever pitch, with racial violence, and it being very apparent that education has to change fundamentally if it's going to serve diverse students. Now, people are more interested in, "Well damn, all this history of composition everywhere, where were the HBCUs? What were the HBCUs doing?" Oh, you guys weren't publishing their work is what it was. I think that the field owes a huge debt to HBCUs.

SW: What is your vision for the field? How does your research, experience with diverse sites of teaching and learning at multiple institutions, and current positioning at an HBCU inform this perspective?

AL: Get it together with this graduate training situation because what we're doing is we're setting people up for a Ponzi. You got all these people in a PhD program and no jobs, academic jobs. I think that my vision for the field would not just be racially inclusive and institutionally inclusive, but it would be in such a way that people wouldn't say, "Oh, I don't want to teach at a community college." Why not? And why are they ostracized from the entire structure of education over here? Leadership in this field is a problem. I feel like if anything, HBCUs should be looked to as leaders right now, because writing programs everywhere could be like, "Well shit, first thing we need to acknowledge is that we're still segregated in institutional type."

Now I'm not saying HBCUs shouldn't have their own space. It's a historically Black institution. There are certain things that go on at these institutions that need their own space. Black students need their own space to some extent. Any institution that is not willing to be transparent, to some extent or open to some extent is going to get left behind. We've got to figure out how we be open and transparent and willing to say what we will and won't do in the name of being human right now. Because we can't keep going the way we're going. We can't keep training endless streams of grad students to reproduce bullshit. You need that interdisciplinary roots, because if you do not talk to people outside of this field and see if the things that you're talking about resonate, you going to get left behind. Because again, it's that ancillary model of reproduction.

I hope everybody in this field can agree that education needs to be free and we need to develop sustainable models of writing instruction that are inclusive, but they have to be initiated by people who know how to make an ask for money, because there's a lot of grants that get wasted. A lot of opportunities for organizing that get wasted because people have very shortsighted vision. My vision is that we would all get some real big vision and stop cutting ourselves off with the things that make us the most interesting, awesome discipline ever.

Imagine, being able to say, "I can teach you wit, cue my business writing class, where we learn about building a persona and discrimination and laws, employment law." I teach my students employment law. Every one of my students, regardless of my classes, has to take a quiz during

the first week of class on employment discrimination. Do you understand what an internship really is? If I can't teach Black women how to advocate for themselves in the workplace and let me be clear, why shouldn't that be the charge of every writing instructor regardless of their institutional location? I think there should be some agreement about what it means to be a citizen. I think we should really be refocusing our energies right now on helping our students develop some sense of intellectual sovereignty and legal literacy that will help them navigate this very, very, very brave new world.

SW: Thanks, Alexandria. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.