

Episode 59: Alisa Russell

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

If you haven't done so already, be sure to subscribe or follow the podcast on whatever platform you're listening on so you'll be the first to know when we release a new episode. In this episode, I get the chance to talk to a colleague and good friend of mine, Alisa Russell. Alisa and I were in grad school together at the University of Kansas. She is absolutely brilliant and I know she's going to contribute to writing studies for a long, long time.

In this episode, Alisa Russell talks about writing across the curriculum (WAC), how WAC programs contribute to institutions, her research in rhetorical genre studies, and the politics of academic language.

Alisa Russell is an Assistant Professor of English in the Writing Program at Wake Forest University. Her areas of interest include rhetorical genre studies, public writing, and writing across the curriculum, and her research focuses on increasing community access through writing and writing innovations. Alisa's work has appeared in journals including *Composition Forum*, *The WAC Journal*, and *The Clearing House*, and she currently serves on the Executive Committee of the Association for Writing across the Curriculum.

Alisa, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: What do you enjoy about Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) or what excites you about the possibilities that exist within WAC programs?

AR: I think what's so exciting about WAC work...I'm actually going to take you back. When I was a graduate research assistant for the WAC Program at George Mason doing my Master's, we did this huge assessment project of all the writing intensive courses. That was a foundational project for me because what I got to do was interview a bunch of faculty across the disciplines. I think a lot of times, really all disciplines maybe, you get very siloed. It's very rare that you get to, especially as a grad student, talk to so many faculty all over the university. But I got to talk to them about what challenges their student writers face and what challenges they face in integrating writing into their classrooms and teaching writing. I realized quickly, all faculty that I talk to value writing. They see how important it is. They see how much their student writers need it to be able to be part of the discipline and know in the discipline and do in the discipline. They want this. They want their student writers to succeed.

It's very difficult. We in Rhet/Comp know how hard it is to teach writing and to integrate writing. So one of the things that's really fun about WAC is getting to work with faculty, kind of seeing... I recently did a workshop with faculty in the disciplines where we were talking about

something as simple as how to use exemplars for an assignment and sample texts and different ways you can bring samples in and let your students evaluate them or analyze them for the moves they're making. And that be something you do to help them prepare to write the assignment. And just seeing their faces be so excited to have this strategy, something concrete that gives it this really important value that they have to improve student writing. This is really exciting.

I think one of the other things that's so important about WAC is that it inherently brings this interdisciplinary view to writing and to scholarship and an awareness of other disciplines. It lets you see how rhetoric and the work of the humanities is in all disciplines. I once taught a writing for engineers course. I had fourteen petroleum and chemical engineers in this course and they were forced to take it. They didn't really want to take it, but they were shocked when we started. I started piling them with all of these texts that engineers write all the time for lots of different audiences, for other engineers, for clients. They write standards. They write instructions. They have to make websites when there's a big public works project. They have to do all of these things and have all this rhetorical flexibility. You can know the engineering all day long, but unless you're able to then put it into a communicative form, write it up in a way that makes sense, it doesn't work.

So it helps bridge that divide, I think, between the sciences and the humanities and shows that it's all implicated in one another. It's really fun to be in that position as a WAC administrator or as a WAC scholar, where you get to see all those connections between disciplines and be in that interdisciplinary space.

SW: What does WAC contribute to institutions or how does WAC affect university programs and campuses?

AR: It's a culture of writing, because WAC sees writing, it's not just part of the English Department, it's all the disciplines. This is how every discipline creates what they do and solidifies how they do their work. You end up with this wider understanding on a campus of how writing is situated, how it's a non-generalizable skill, that it's an area of expertise. It takes time to study it and learn it and figure out how to teach it and how to develop. That's always a big plus when other disciplines see the validity of your discipline, of Rhet/Comp and of Writing Studies. Because you have...you're helping foster this wider culture of writing on campus.

I've been thinking a lot about, because a lot of my other research focuses on the relationship between writing and access and how writing shapes access to different actions or settings or communities, and so thinking about a lot of social justice movements in Writing Studies and Rhet/Comp and what that looks like, identity and difference in writing, alternative assessment practices, all these things. WAC, to me, is an inherently socially just practice. I'm not saying that it doesn't need renewed attention and critique and that there are a lot of things we could be doing to increase the way it contributes to social justice initiatives.

But when we treat writing like it's a one-and-done skill, like you can just learn it in first-year comp and then...automatically, you can do it in any discipline, what we're really doing is those who already have some writing knowledge for different disciplines because of their experiences or backgrounds, end up succeeding. While maybe those who don't, who are maybe further away from those discourses in different disciplines, can end up not succeeding when you're not teaching it or making it a part of the instruction or making it explicit. To me, WAC increases students' access to their disciplines. It increases their ability to engage with course content and increases their ability to contribute by making writing part of the conversation. That's a really exciting place to be, I think, to think of WAC work as a social justice initiative in itself.

SW: We've been talking about the value of WAC programs. I'm interested in hearing more about the challenges WAC programs face.

AR: All the things that I just said that make it so exciting and valuable are also the things that make it so challenging. It's a total double-edged thing here. WAC work does happen at the administrative and student levels. I actually think it's a Mike Palmquist piece, where he has this great WAC model, where it's not just working with faculty, but it's also working at these different levels. But most models still happen at the faculty level, like faculty development, faculty workshops, working with faculty on their assignment prompts, on their course design, things like that. That's part of what makes it so fun, I think, is working with all these different faculty. But it's also a challenge because faculty are strapped. Faculty are busy. Faculty have a million things on their plates, and learning new pedagogies, redesigning your courses or assignments, this is hard. And it's time consuming.

It also needs to be a collaborative conversation, not just me, I'm the writing expert and I'm telling you what to do. But actually, I know a lot about writing, but you're the one who knows about writing in your discipline, so we have to collaborate and work together. But that takes a lot of time. It takes a lot of buy-in. A lot of times it's important to have, I mean, we're touching on a bigger conversation of incentivizing and paying people for professional development. You need incentives, a stipend to do a seminar series. Or you need a developed program and a range of curricular options that different faculty can plug into based on the time or expertise they already have. You need ongoing support. A one-time seminar or workshop is wonderful, but we all have that high of coming out of a workshop, oh, we're going to make all these changes. And then we try one thing and it fails. And we're like, well, maybe not. You need that ongoing support.

So all of those things require a budget. They require buy-in from upper administration. One challenge is...convincing everyone that the time is worth it. That this is a valuable practice and that this is somewhere we should put our money because this is really important. That can be a challenge that varies from institutional context. Another challenge that's related is finding how WAC fits into an institution, especially if it's like a program. I just said that it's inherently interdisciplinary. So then where does it go? Is it a standalone program, like in the Provost Office? Is it part of the English Department? Is it connected to the Writing Center? Is it a branch

of the Center for Teaching Excellence? A lot of that gets decided for a variety of factors, usually outside of the director or whoever's part of the WAC program's control.

Then it's about how to stay sustainable in whatever institutional space you're in. If you are part of an English Department, that presents you new sets of challenges to show that this isn't just an English thing, that this is an interdisciplinary thing. Or if you're connected to the Writing Center, that presents challenges in you're not just here for students. This is the faculty branch. Then budget lines get really complicated. It's all about wherever you are institutionally. Some of the things, partnering with other projects, layering your mission into other campus initiatives, setting up structures, they're going to outlive any one director or board or whatever your leadership is. A lot of those sustainability issues become an issue depending on where you are in the institution.

Then finally, as maybe anyone who studies writing knows, the successful teaching of writing and writing improvement is famously difficult to measure and assess. Because WAC is usually having to answer to upper administration, we're always facing that challenge of how do we prove the efficacy of WAC? How do we prove that this is working? Chris Anson actually has a really great piece about different assessment data that can be effective when combined in different ways. But I think this is a challenge that all of Rhet/Comp faces. How do we assess? How do we measure writing progress?

SW: Your teaching and research interests focus on Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). Can you talk about how RGS informs WAC and/or can you discuss the intersections between RGS and Writing Across the Curriculum?

AR: Totally. I love this question, too. I actually wrote out an answer for this one because it's so obvious to me. RGS and WAC so completely go hand in hand. I see it so clearly that I actually have trouble articulating it sometimes because it's like so obvious. I actually wrote this one out so that I could articulate it.

RGS is all about looking at how writing happens in patterned ways across different spaces. The genre isn't a form that we pour content into, but I'm going to pull out Queen Carolyn Miller, we call her Queen Carolyn at KU, in her famous words, "They're typified rhetorical action based in recurrent situations." Basically, genres are how we act. They're how we do things through writing. If we take, for example, the genre of the syllabus, the action it performs, it lets us communicate our expectations and our goals for a course. The syllabus is how we do that.

But what's interesting about genre...well, I think a lot of things are interesting about genre, but one of the most interesting things about genre is that it usually develops because it's useful. Someone thought, "I need a way to communicate my expectations and goals for my course." And they put a syllabus together. But then that becomes the standard. Once it exists and once people start seeing that it's useful, it starts to shape what we see as necessary actions. It helped us act in the first place, but now that we have the syllabus, we feel like we have to do it and we have to do it in this way. RGS calls that a duality of structure. Genres become how we do things, but a lot of

times they're also why we do things. Why do we write a syllabus? Because the syllabus exists. But it's also how we get our expectations across.

Where this becomes so helpful for WAC work is because the genres of a discipline are what constitute its work. The ways of knowing and doing of a discipline are literally baked into the writing that happens and the forms of writing and the genres that exists. If we think about an IMRaD article versus a thesis first article versus a thesis last article, these reflect the values of the disciplines and the professions. These actually reflect the process of inquiry and discovery. It's baked into the way we write our articles. I don't know if there are any grad students listening, I mean, it's like, it was so hard to write an article for the first time. It's one of the hardest things I feel like I've ever had to do. But now I think that way. Now that I've written several articles, that's actually how I approach research and inquiry and questions. It would be hard for me to do my research, not in article form. Does that make sense?

...because that's what our discipline values. If I switched disciplines, it would be a whole new learning experience. Genre is very much a concept that everyone can grab onto. I do a genre-based first-year writing course. My first-year students love it because we all know what genres are. Oh, it's a report. Oh, it's a syllabus. Oh, it's an assignment prompt. Oh, it's a Twitter, a tweet. A Twitter! [laughs] It's something everyone can grab onto, including faculty in the disciplines. It's a really great strategy to say, "You don't have to focus on writing this big thing that's hard to define and talk about." Let's talk about the different genres we write, because that makes an audience, purpose, different rhetorical moves.

We can collect samples and analyze these moves to see how the disciplines vary. But we can do that with our students in class. We can think about the various genres we write even within one profession or one discipline and how we reach different audiences for different purposes. It gives a language to writing and teaching writing that I think faculty appreciate and I think students appreciate. But then it also creates the space to be critically reflective. If genres reflect values and bake in values of the discipline and ways of thinking, what does this genre maybe not allow for? Or who does it not allow for? And why? If we want this in what we're calling standard edited English, why? What does that reflect? What does that tell you about our discipline? What would it mean to not write it in standard edited English?

If we always do thesis last, what would it mean to not do that? What would it mean to not have a thesis? What would it mean to have an implicit thesis? What does that mean for our audience? Then you get to talk about social expectations. You get to talk about discourse stacking. And you get to talk about agency. You can always change the genre. It's not deterministic. You can write it however you want. It's becomes a matter of risk. What statement are you trying to make? Are you going to risk your purpose? Is it worth risking it in this moment? If you're doing a resume and cover letter, trying to get a job, is this the moment you want to take a big risk and do the genre differently than what's expected? Maybe? Maybe because that's going to get you noticed. But it could also get it thrown in the trash.

By centering genre and WAC work, it gives you a space to also be critical. It's not just, this is what writing looks like in our field. It's, this is what writing looks like in our field, but what values does that reflect? And are those the values we want it to reflect? Here are tools to change it if you want. But here's also the risks, so that we're thinking critically about how we're writing.

SW: In your 2018 article in Composition Forum, "The Politics of Academic Language: Towards a Framework for Analyzing Language Representations in FYC Textbooks," you pay close attention to how first-year composition textbooks frame "academic language," and how these representations might not align with larger social justice and inclusion initiatives in our field. You recommend writing teachers consider other artifacts beyond textbooks, like rubrics, prompts, syllabi, course goals, and TA training materials. Maybe you could talk a bit about this article and your findings, and then how your teaching has changed based on this work?

AR: Great question. So, I mean, I talk a little bit about...and that article is open access, which I super also believe in. So, yay! Yay, *Comp Forum*! People are free to go look at that. But I will say the findings from that, doing such a very close analysis, and I had all these categories that I was looking for, of a few paragraphs in a textbook of how they talk about academic language...

It seemed silly to me, at first. I actually started it as a seminar paper. The professor of that class is actually on the English Language Studies linguistic side of things. He was wanting me to be very, very systematic in how I approached the analysis. It felt like overkill. But once I actually did it, I realized how many value judgements were baked into these descriptions. We think of textbooks as being, well, maybe not us in Rhet/Comp, but many people think of textbooks as being neutral and objective.

But when I actually dug around, even with these little paragraphs that said what language you should use in academic writing, there were a lot of words, like "correct," or "appropriate," or "right." Words that...not what an audience expects, but literally putting these moral judgments. I think the biggest takeaway, what I continue to take away from that article, is that we as writing teachers can end up framing things as "correct" or "right," instead of an option, or one choice of many, or what your audience might expect, or simply a preference at this time. We don't talk about the why behind certain conventions. I think so often we can end up talking about different rhetorical moves as the right moves, or the correct moves when I think we need to drop that value moral judgment language altogether.

As an example, in terms of how this influences other genres, take an assignment prompt. If I list out, I believe in being transparent about my grading and my expectations. That's key. I used to always list out my prompts, what an exemplary version of this will look like. Like, what am I looking for? It'll be stuff like a focused main claim that sets up whatever, an organization that does blah di blah, things like that. We all know this. But just as key as making those expectations transparent, is bringing your students into a conversation of why those are your expectations. Those aren't your expectations because it's the only way, or it's the correct way, because it's the moral high ground. That's almost never the case. So if you want to say, you want a focused main

claim and not an implicit main claim, why? If you say you're looking for an individualistic tone or style, why?

A lot of times there is a good reason. Genres develop these conventions for a reason. Usually, it helps us do what we're trying to do. It's because there's a social contract, or the audience expects it, or it helps make your idea clear for people who are reading quickly, or signposting helps us move through a text more easily. There are a lot of times really good reasons, but a lot of times, too, it's because it's always been done that way. It becomes solidified. It's worth talking about audience expectations. It's worth talking about how part of why the audience might expect it is because that audience has been White for a long time, or that audience has been middle or upper class for a long time. It reflects those values. It reflects those ways of knowing and doing.

There isn't "right" and "wrong" in this space. There aren't moral judgments. It's instead about this reflects larger systematic structures, like all genres do. So if you format your resume, let's say in paragraph style, instead of in bullet points, that's not wrong. It is a different way of doing it. Because the question becomes wrong for whom? Wrong to whom? Then we're getting into, well, who's reading it and what kind of power do they have? And why do they have that power? Usually, because of Whiteness. So it's a different way. Then you get to talk about, well, here are some reasons that that might make it less effective for your purposes in this situation. But maybe you want to take that risk.

These genres are more than the literal text. It's also how they get composed. What I'd like to do with a lot of these teaching genres, these rubrics, because I don't want to not have expectations anymore. That's not the answer. I'm still grading, let's be clear. The composing process has changed for me. I still list those expectations, but I don't have them until we discuss them with my students. We create them together. We look at a lot of samples. We talk about what an exemplary piece will do. A lot of times it ends up having several options. It'll either be organized this way, this way, or this way, or in a way that makes sense for the piece. It ends up being very open. Then students have to explain to me, in an accompanying reflection, what rhetorical choices they made in their piece and why. I end up grading their reflections more heavily than the actual piece, because that's where they're showing me their thinking. I did this on purpose. I broke this rule on purpose. Or, I followed this rule on purpose.

Gosh, talk about rhetorical flexibility. Talk about rhetorical awareness. It's increasing student agency. A lot of students want to do what's expected. Some don't. And they all have different reasons. But again, most of what's "right" is actually White and upper class. I don't ever want to frame any kind of rhetorical move or genre as a whole as "right" or "correct." No matter whether it's language, organization, no matter what it is. It's about how do we make this work? How do we make it work for you and your purpose?

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