

Episode 125: Allison Carr

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Allison Carr talks about environmental rhetoric, writing, pedagogy, and failure and revision.

Allison Carr is Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Director of Writing Across the Curriculum at Coe College (IA), where she teaches courses in rhetoric, theory, composition, and creative nonfiction writing. Her research engages the emotional and affective dimensions of failure, and her writing on this subject has appeared most recently in the introduction to her collection with Laura Micciche, *Failure Pedagogies: Learning and Unlearning What It Means To Fail* (2020). She has also published creative nonfiction in *The Rumpus*, *CRAFT Literary*, and other venues. Her essay "Losing Composure" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2021, and included in the Notable index of Best American Essays 2021. Currently, she is working on a collection about revision with collaborators Christina LaVecchia, Laura Micciche, Hannah Rule and Jayne Stone.

Allison, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You've taught numerous writing and rhetoric classes from creative nonfiction writing to environmental rhetoric, and I'm really interested in what class you are enjoying teaching the most right now, or maybe the class that has most captivated your attention or interest most recently and why.

AC: Yeah, thank you for having me, Shane. This is very exciting for me. I've been catching up on a lot of Pedagogue episodes over the summer on my daily little walks. This question, it's almost like you're asking me to pick my favorite child or my favorite dog or something, so it's really tough to choose. But I have spent a lot of time recently prepping my environmental rhetoric course. I want to say by giving you some context here that this is not part of my graduate training. I didn't take any courses in environmental rhetoric or environmental communication or science communication or anything in graduate school, so I really had to pick it up. I inherited it.

It's a course that's knitted into many programs in the college, so it wasn't an option to just not have it. I've been really grateful to colleagues both locally and outside of my local context who have given me a lot of help figuring out how to structure the course. I want to call out three: one is Lauren Cagle from UK (University of Kentucky), a previous Pedagogue guest who sent me some materials maybe five years ago that really helped me turn a corner. And then more recently, Min Song from Boston College. I'll say something more about him in a little bit. And then just this summer, I've been in touch a little bit with Tim Jensen at Oregon State, and all these folks have given me big lifts on this course.

This is a rhetoric course; it does draw on my background in rhetoric, and then we are just doing that through climate and environmental discourse. Of all my courses, it draws probably the widest variety of students, their majors, their interests, their plans post-graduation. Of course,

because of the subject, it feels really urgent, which brings a lot of energy to the room that isn't probably as palpable in my other classes. It's one reason it's a favorite course. When I first started teaching it, we were focusing primarily on the ways political actors have contorted or perhaps straight up denied scientific conclusions in order to do nothing on climate. I'll never forget these evals where students wrote that they felt this course was vital and that it should be required in the college, but that it was so depressing that sometimes they thought they couldn't come to class. I thought, "Well, that's in some ways a great problem to have, but also a terrible problem to have." I've been working on making it less depressing, which is hard to do because the climate emergency is very despairing.

But this year I'm using several chapters from this collection that just came out last year. It's called *Genre in the Climate Debate*, and it's an edited collection. It has chapters from Amy Devitt, Charles Bazerman, Reiff and Bawarshi, and a few others. It's open access. You can just Google it right now. It's so good. I just found it in a Twitter thread, so I love it. That's going to be the anchoring text, and it's going to help us look at the ways the climate emergency has been textured by all these different genres and all these different stakeholders. The really cool thing is so much of the book is focused on these like public genres. So, they're things that students are familiar with, but they haven't ever really thought about in a critical or rhetorical frame. So, there's a lot of aha moments, or I hope there will be. I guess I still need to teach the book, so that's going to be the anchor of the course.

Then what's really exciting for me is these two projects that students will work on. And one of them is an ongoing project that lasts for basically eight weeks, and it's called an Everyday Life Project. This is a project invented, or at least brought into my consciousness by Min Song, who I mentioned, at Boston College. He teaches this climate fiction course, and then he's written about this. He has a book that just came out in the spring called *Climate Lyricism* from Duke. It's gorgeous; you should read it. So, he describes it in there, so I would send you to the source for the kind of firsthand description of it. The overview of it here is that students essentially commit to some sort of climate action or an action related to environmentalism for about eight weeks, and they have to journal about it and reflect about it, and we bring it into class discussion. The purpose of this project maybe is twofold. One is to set habits that are beneficial for the environment. The other purpose is actually just to give us, as a group and as individuals, a sort of touchstone of hope every day of our work in this course. Dr. Song's example when he describes this is that he committed to riding his bike to school every day, right? So it's meant to be something achievable that you can directly say, "I'm not increasing my footprint when I do this."

The other project, after students have spent the whole term learning about rhetoric and genre, they are asked to create some kind of text that will communicate some kind of message about the environment or climate that they feel is urgent and important to them. I need to bring all that rhetorical learning to bear. Some examples students have done in the past, one student wrote a children's book about endangered species. One student did a Twitter thread about overpopulation as a straw man argument. I've had students write futuristic fiction. I've had a student who did a walking tour of climate change in our neighborhood, like a "climate change happens here" kind of a thing. One student did a satire tourism package for like near future climate destruction.

And then this one student merged the Everyday Life Project and the final project, which was really cool. For the Everyday Life Project, she collected and cataloged litter around our campus for six or eight weeks. And then she did a little analysis on her data and put together a memo—this was the Message Project—she put together a memo for college officials about where different kinds of waste receptacles could improve the litter situation, right? Both of those course projects are really designed to help students keep their head above water even when confronting this global crisis. And maybe, just to zoom out here, to kind of give a little love to my nonfiction courses, I think all my teaching, whether nonfiction or rhetoric, is really about helping students understand the power that their words have in the world. That's my one-sentence mission.

SW: Allison, when I was getting my master's at Fresno State you published "On Support of Failure" in Composition Forum. That was back in 2013. I remember Asao telling me about this piece and really your piece shaped my thesis. I'll always be a fan of your work, and I'm super thankful for that piece in Composition Forum. Failure and the role of failure in writing pedagogy is definitely one theme in your research. Can you talk more about your definition and reorientation of failure and its relation to writing pedagogy and how this understanding of failure influences your own classroom pedagogies, practices, and policies?

AC: I'm blushing at your admiration of the work. I really appreciate that. There's a little bit of irony here for me because I have really mixed feelings about failure now, ten years on. But I'll speak to the question and then maybe we'll follow up on that aspect of it. In the 2013 piece in *Comp Form*, that was my first sort of big-time solo piece which then expanded into a dissertation. I sketched out this pedagogy of failure that was emphasizing the affective and relational quality of failure. I was trying to imagine a writing classroom that would actually set students up to fail, where failure is just the point of being together and working together, and it's not something that should be avoided. I described some activities at the end of that article that might cultivate that sort of pedagogy. I was operating under this theory that these are the kinds of things that would encourage deeper curiosity and as a result, embolden students to take bigger risks in their work.

But a decade post, you know, in a lot of ways, I think I really am still keyed into what maybe I'll now call like an ethos of failure, an affective ethos of failure. In a very plain way, I suppose I'm very open about sharing my failures with my students, with my colleagues, with my boss. I feel really committed to normalizing this idea of just naming failures. And I really mean failure; I don't just mean mistakes. I really mean like that thing that happens where you feel like garbage, you know? And that part of this is also just about feeling our feelings and naming them and understanding feelings or information. That pit in your stomach is information for you about what's going on in front of you when it comes to more practical applications. At the start of the pandemic, in part because of the pressure of teaching in the midst of widespread trauma and need for flexibility, I took a pretty strong turn toward contract grading. I had been working toward it for a little while, integrating contracts into some parts of my courses and the pandemic really just pushed me into the pool, and I'll never look back. I'm very grateful that I was pushed in that way.

I'm now working on getting students more connected to that process, having them reflect more on where they're struggling in the learning with the contract itself. That's been part of the

learning curve for me is understanding. I guess I have some reservation about contract language because it feels very final. I'm learning to think about that as a softer term, and try to constantly be asking, "What is serving the students in front of me?" It doesn't necessarily matter what served my students last term, right? What's going to serve this group? So, that part's still in process, but I'm trying to integrate more collaboration, I suppose, with students on the assessment part of the course. So that's one piece that maybe an ethos of failure or of safety and risk taking is perhaps coming into play.

Another piece of it is with regard to assignments. Sometimes I have assignments where the purpose of the assignment is for the student to do a very specific kind of writing, right? And that's one kind of thing. But actually, maybe more than half of my coursework in a course is stuff that can be open, right? These basic little homework things respond to the reading. In the past, maybe I would say write a summary, and now I'm actually just not directing how to respond. Because I'm working on contract grading, I need students doing homework because I need them being connected to the course. I want them to clear a homework hurdle, but I don't ask them to complete a hundred percent of the homework assignments in order to clear that hurdle.

Maybe it's 80%, that's what I've done in the past. So, hypothetically, imagine that the hurdle you need to clear is 20, okay? I've got a dozen different types of assignments ranging from one to five points. You could clear your homework hurdle by doing four five-point assignments, which are much more involved, or you could do 10 lower stakes kinds of assignments or simpler types of assignments or some mix of that, right? Because all you need to do is hit 20 by the end of the term. So, that's sort of how it works. There's also room for students to bring me assignments. Maybe they've had something they've enjoyed doing in another class, they can bring that in and say, "Could we do this?" And I think it should be worth this amount of points or whatever.

So, there's three things going on here that I think are kind of connecting us back to this ethos of failure. One is that it gives students much more agency in how they are engaging and connecting to the course, which is important to me, and I think it increases their engagement overall. Two is that the higher end of the assignments, at least in theory, are incentivizing this failure, let's say "failure," in a controlled environment. Of course, the other part of that is if students don't feel up for that kind of a risk on any given week or any stretch of time, they just want to do something that feels really familiar, they can just do that and that's fine too. I'm trying to be more sensitive than my early work would've suggested about the level of buy-in that students need to have. And then third thing that's going on is that there's a lot of different work going on. That then lets us have conversations about what students are working in eight or 10 modalities on a given assignment or given text. What are those things drawing out? What different ideas are they drawing out of the material?

The through line that I think is something that holds up is that failure is a common and convenient vehicle disrupting routines, provoking reconsiderations to the work that we do and the choices that we make. These are some ways I'm trying to sideline like the punitive risk factor, which is not important to me. It doesn't really align with my values. I'm not trying to be an antagonist, but then centering the creative and intellectual possibilities that I think failure

brings into view, I'm trying to thread that needle. I'm sure there are ways that I keep failing at it, but that's where I am at the moment.

SW: Your co-edited collection with Laura Micciche, Failure Pedagogies, was published in 2020 and now I'm wondering how your conception of failure changed from that 2013 article to this most recent collection. That's seven years and maybe seven years of contemplating what you would've said differently in 2013. Is there something you can pinpoint in this collection that you feel like expands what you were doing in 2013 or maybe even takes a different direction that addresses some of the gaps in that 2013 article?

AC: Yeah, I've just pulled one of my copies here to browse through it a little bit. Some of the pieces that really kind of made me sit back in my chair and go, "Oh my gosh, wow. I wasn't thinking of this," and I'm so glad that we did that. We opted for an edited collection, and I didn't try to take on a book project all by myself because my perspective on failure, I think the big whiff for me in thinking about my early work is just how I'm a white cis woman who has a PhD, right? I have a pretty specific position in the world that has a lot of privilege. I didn't do a very good job of accounting for that in my earlier work. I wish I would have.

Part of the idea for this collection was me starting to really wrestle with that. As soon as I started my job here, which was in 2014, I felt like, "Oh, I'm supposed to do something with my dissertation, right? I'm supposed to do something." I really stalled out for a while. I'll just be very honest; I had terrible writer's block and then I wrote something very weird and I submitted it to CCC and it got rejected. I got reader reports, but I was so wounded by just the email. It was a form email; there was nothing wrong with the email, but I actually didn't even open my reader reports for literally a year. And by then I had this sense that there's something I didn't do that I want to do. But I don't know how to do it really, and I don't want to mess it up. So, I was spinning my wheels for a long time and eventually I read reader reports and they were totally fine and good. Maybe I'll still do something; I don't know. At that point, Laura and I had been talking about this book, so I just moved past that experience in order to focus on this book. I'm really happy that it went that way because I really liked not trying to write as an authority.

I really liked being part of a chorus, I suppose, and centering other perspectives. As I'm just looking through the table of contents, the very first chapter is like an appreciation of cliches and an examination of why cliché is okay and actually good in student writing and we shouldn't be so committed to some idea about good writing that we overlook the cognitive role that a cliché can play for someone learning a new discourse, learning to level up their writing. There's a piece in here on Title IX, on the failures of Title IX processes at a college. One piece that really stands out to me, memorably, is one of the very final chapters, which is from Aja Martinez. It's a counterstory and it was my first introduction to counterstory as a method. It's really been on my mind a lot since then. I'm a big fan of her work.

The last thing that I want to say is about the ongoing process of reflecting on the work that I've done and thinking about what might be next for me. I just had a sabbatical. It was my first sabbatical, which provokes a lot of reflection. I'm like, "What am I doing? What am I doing in this career? What's next for me?" I remain very interested in failure maybe because I recognize my own shortcomings with regard to the work that I've done and not quite knowing how to

correct that or whether it can be corrected. Maybe I'm just destined to always be doing it most of the way, but not all of the way, right? Maybe I'm not going to solve it and that's also fine; maybe none of us ever solve anything. But I find failure both a very sticky term and a very slippery term. When I say sticky, I mean it, like people have very visceral associations with it. When I say slippery, I mean its meaning changes from person to person.

I don't know. I'm less committed to it as a concept that maybe is portable. I know what it means for me, but I'm not necessarily committed to this idea that I can say this is a pedagogy of failure and this is what it would mean to do it, right? Connecting some dots here, between talking about my teaching and then talking about this research and my own existential turmoil with regard to it is that everything I described about my classroom, my desire to be transparent with students, my move to contract grading, my effort to be as flexible as I can be in terms of the way students are connecting to my courses; I think failure led me to all of that.

But I feel that my angle of vision has really zoomed out and I'm seeing these things not necessarily as evidence of a pedagogy of failure, but actually as cornerstones in a pedagogy that's care-oriented, committed to transparency, like I said, really committed to equity. All that stuff I feel is really about trying to increase access and equity in my classrooms. I don't know what to call that in like a pithy way, but I would say those are the phrases that drive what I'm trying to do. I think that I actually can't hold onto an idea of what failure's going to mean beyond my very hyper local context. It all has to be really contingent and contextual, that's like a feature, not a bug.

SW: Allison, this is my last question. I was hoping you could talk more about your recent research. So, you're working on an edited collection on revision among advanced writers. It's called Revising Moves: Showing and Narrating Revision in Action. Maybe you could give us a glimpse at what you're doing in this collection and what we as readers and teachers can expect from it and how it might impact or affect our teaching.

AC: Yeah, I have had a lot of fun on this book so far. We're really in the thick of it at the moment, which makes it difficult to summarize. I've been looking at sentences for the last two weeks. We're working on the introduction, and so I'm really in the weeds on it. I'll try to be brief but let me tell you who's working on it. It's a five-editor team, which is the biggest collab I've ever been a part of. It's Laura Micciche, Christina LaVecchia, Hannah Rule, and Jayne Stone. Hannah, Christina, and I were all grad students together at the University of Cincinnati. Since our UC days, we've been in a writing group that used to meet face to face and now we just meet online. Laura was our mentor all through; she directed all of our dissertations, and we've all collaborated together on a lot of different things, really get on quite well.

Jayne is new to the group. Jayne is a PhD student studying with Laura right now. Happily and marvelously, this book came from Jayne; it came from a paper that Jayne was working on with Laura. Laura got in touch with us 18 months ago and said, "I think we have a project. Do you guys want to be part of this?" Of course, the answer was "yes." Of course, I'll say "yes" to Laura, no matter what it is. "Do you need help burying a body, Laura? I'll help you." <laughs>

We spent the spring and summer working on a CFP. What we thought we were asking for when we sent that out was, we thought we were proposing a book that would really pull back the curtain on what revision looks like for advanced writers. There's a lot out there on student writers, less so on professional writers, right? That CFP essentially said, "Hey, show us your mess, right? Show us how your drafts are changing over time. Show us screenshots of texts that you share with your co-authors. Give us excerpts from reader reports and talk about how you are integrating those kinds of things into your revision." The authors gave us all that stuff and we got these marvelous proposals and a marvelous set of chapters. But what we found in our first pass was that the energy or the life of revision actually didn't stick to the artifacts the way we thought they would. The vibration of revision was really in the narratives themselves. They were sharing artifacts and data with us, but where we were really keyed in was in moments where they're trying to give us a kind of an intimate look at their process, or a description of their process, or how their thinking about their project changed, or in many cases actually how their thinking about they themselves and their roles changed.

So, midway through the kind of first big stage of putting the book together, we saw that pattern and it felt very serendipitous and it felt like we should just follow that. We had been working with authors over the summer essentially encouraging them to really lean into that and really build up the story aspect of the book. So, that's where we are right now. One really kind of happy and very challenging vexing problem that that introduced was when we wrote our CFP, we had a very cut and dry organization scheme, but this move towards story really upended that, because of the kinds of things that were blooming out of these chapters is, is not totally what we anticipated. Now we've been working on organizing it. In a way, this is the big work of the summer, was organizing, reordering chapters in a way that we hope will create a kind of an arc that feels more like a narrative across all these differently authored chapters rather than the kind of maybe more academically edited collection, the sort of thing that we might be more familiar with.

Let me give you an overview of what that looks like. In the beginning of the book, we have three chapters where authors have a really strong sense of what they will and will not do. They're very straightforward and declarative chapters. Then, we move into a set of chapters that use revision to explore author identity. Then, we move into a set of chapters that use revision to explore author identity in the context of professional documents and texts that are often obscured from view. We have authors in that section talking about their job market materials, talking about writing letters of recommendation, talking about working on annual review, looking for a sense of identity in annual review. Then, we move into some stories that focus pretty heavily on how revision is propelled by feedback in various forms, reader reports, things like that. From there, we move into a series of chapters that show scholars really struggling.

The main thing they're struggling with is protecting their vision. We've just left chapters that are about working with feedback, and now we're working in a group of texts where the feedback is creating some tension in terms of what needs to stay and go and how does an author protect what's important to them while also maybe letting go of some things. Finally, we close the book with a handful of chapters that resist resolution. One author is giving us a look at an ongoing revision that is frequently interrupted—and I don't mean that term in a negative way necessarily, I think you'll find in this chapter it's often welcome—but frequently interrupted by the

challenges of having a family and having to juggle work priorities with family priorities. Another author is writing about a project that's long in the past that really can't be revised, but still wrestling with the un-revisability of it. It's going to be a really unique book in the landscape of writing studies in terms of what to expect, whether as a reader or a teacher. We're imagining this book really as a mentor text. I'm using that term in order to distance it from maybe a cousin, which would be a guidebook of best practices. We're floating away from that a little bit. We really hope and anticipate that it will provoke a lot of connections for readers, whether because they recognize something that's really familiar to them, or perhaps, more importantly, that they get connected into chapters that represent something new and different and they're getting some new perspective on this activity that defines and really moves so much of our professional life.

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