Episode 105: Amy J. Lueck
Transcript

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

In this episode, Amy J. Lueck talks about spatial rhetorics, public memory, archival research, dual credit and concurrent enrollment, and erasing borders between high school and higher education.

Amy J. Lueck is Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Composition at Santa Clara University, where her research and teaching focus on histories of rhetorical instruction and practice, women's rhetorics, feminist historiography, and public memory. Her book, *A Shared History: Writing in the High School, College, and University, 1856-1886* (SIU Press 2020), brings together several of these research threads, interrogating the ostensible high school-college divide and the role it has played in shaping writing instruction in the U.S. Her recent research builds on this work by attending to the conceptual boundaries and metaphors shaping history and remembrance at various sites, from universities and the tribal homelands on which they are built to historic attractions like the Winchester Mystery House.

Amy, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your teaching and research focus on spatial rhetorics and public memory. How do these frameworks inform your approach to teaching writing? And what kinds of assignments do you use in your classroom to help center spatial rhetorics and public memory?

AJL: First of all, I want to just say, thank you again, Shane, for having me on the show. I am a really big fan and I'm so grateful to be talking with you. Spatial rhetorics and public memory are key terms that I've come to more recently in my research in teaching, to name what was kind of a diffused basket of practices and interests that began with a more narrow interest in rhetorical histories and archival research practices for me. But gradually expanded to encompass and attention to the sites of those histories, and the boundaries and processes of historiography and cultural formation that were more broad.

I've kind of come to these concepts of spatial rhetoric and public memory to make these histories and processes of commemoration, which are things that I was finding myself really interested in, more generally applicable to students and writers and people in lots of different kinds of positions. Questions of public memory for me get beyond questions of capital "H" history to broader questions of how we come to know the past. And how we come to know the past of others, and how we come to know ourselves in relation to those processes. As part of this I found myself wanting to think more about the role of place in the production of rhetorics and histories as well.

The concept of spatial rhetorics is a good way to talk with students about place, built environment, design and all of these other material factors that are shaping the ways that they know, and especially what they know and understand about historical knowledges. But not only that, the attention to spatial rhetorics allows us to engage our environment more critically in general. And so, the historical part of it is really pressing and relevant today. It's an easier case to make recently with public debates about monuments and naming, and cultural memory issues being in the news in a lot of places in ways that are explicitly historical. But again, it also sets up the conversation about discourse and representation and identity in the present more broadly.

In the writing classroom, for me this might begin with a basic attention to where students are writing. What room or seat, public or private spaces, home or campus, and thinking about how that affects the ways they're conceptualizing writing itself. Touching on embodiment and affect and material rhetorics more broadly as part of that process. We might read the classroom as a space. We might look at how the space marks itself as a space for certain people, certain uses, and not others. That provides this pathway into attending to that kind of dispersive and material construction of space historically as well, because of the kind of residual material histories of the spaces that we occupy over time.

We might also look at the way space or place are invoked or used as metaphors, like interrogating the meaning that has become packed into representations of college writing for instance. If we are relying on the image of the college classroom and the college campus or a spatial arrangement of the kind of academic trajectory that we imagine from K12 to college in this vertical ladder, what are all of the ways that space comes into play in the metaphorically as we think about our experiences and these places we occupy as well.

One assignment that I've done for a long time in my first-year writing courses, but have only more recently thought of in terms of spatial rhetorics and public memory, involves reading and comparing a few different representations of what college is or what it's about. So they don't seem to have anything to do with space or public memory. They just are representations of, here's what college is or should be. Different essays, commencement speeches, et cetera. So we've for a long time had this examination of what do we mean by college? What do we mean by college writing as part of my classes? Is it an experience? Is it a place? Is it a curriculum? Is it a stage of life? Is it two years, is it four years? But the more recent frame of spatial rhetorics and public memory helps us to think of the ways that these essays and the images of college that they circulate, are actually drawing on really powerful discourses and rhetorics that are located and embodied, and that circulate ideas about space and place and produce exclusions from places like college campuses in their course.

The ways ideas are shaped by places and places are constituted by these ideas. What does it even mean or do to understand a space or a set of practices in relation to a college campus, quote, unquote How is that designation shaping discourse experience and historical memory? Again, this is a activity that I've been doing in the classroom, but have come into this frame of spatial rhetorics. But spatial rhetorics and public memory also I think really importantly provide a pathway out of the classroom, to read the campus and the surrounding community as rhetorical commemorative landscapes that are doing work as well. For instance, our university is located at the site of a historic Spanish Mission, one of the 21 colonial outposts in Alta, California. Historical appeals are everywhere here, and in a really self-apparently historical way.

We use the campus, in my classes, as a site of public memory to study because we all have access to it, and we all have attachment to it and investment in it as students and faculty here. I've been really fortunate to have team taught a class with an anthropologist at my university, Lee Panich, who's an expert in Native Ohlone history and culture at the Missions. In those writing classes, we study the ways history and memory are shaped and circulated here, which is really powerful for a lot of reasons. One of which being that student come in knowing just very little about California Indian history and the history of the Missions before they come into this class even though they walk by the Mission, built by Native Ohlone people, every day.

In addition to the Mission and in other assignments and upper division writing courses, we look at sites significant to them. And we look at the ways that they construct a sense of place and historical memory in the same way, whether they are historical sites or not. We can apply that same set of skills to critically reading and engaging the different spaces that they occupy in their lives. Again, the spatial rhetorics and public memory piece I think helps students to see the work of rhetoric and writing all around them, in these various texts and materials, not just in the things that they're reading on a page. And to see the ways that they are historical agents themselves. They are parts of history, they're shaping and reflecting history. I want that broader attention to the ways the world is written to be the what we're looking at in writing classes,

SW: As you're examining histories and spaces and memories, I imagine this work intersects with archival research. Perhaps institutional archives, and maybe even special collections. How do you talk about archives and archival research with students, and how do you invite them to participate and take interest in archival research? Has there been a particular assignment or activity that encourages students to do this work successfully in your own writing class?

AJL: First, I want to acknowledge that there are of course lots of ways to use and study archives, and archives are lots of different things. But what I really like to do in my classes is, as you're suggesting, that most familiar and traditional version of archives—institutional archives and special collections at the institution I'm at or community archives in the surrounding area and looking at historical texts and artifacts. That is something that is unexpected for students in a lot of ways. They don't think that that's something that they're going to be doing coming into the class.

But surprisingly, or not, I think archives really sell themselves to students. As soon as they've gotten in there, even though most students don't necessarily like history with a capital “H,” they don't think they do, they almost can't help but find historical texts and objects interesting, even just out of curiosity. There's really a powerful political movement to reconsider history and memory right now, as we were talking about, and students have that in their pocket as well. They're suspicious or curious about the ways that histories have been constructed in the past.

I really build on that curiosity and pin it to those questions of location and public remembrance. One of the things that we do is encourage them to seek their own interests and experiences in the archive. And to see the ways those materials provide different perspectives on their own experiences and historical consciousness. And to be critical of that whole process of representation and remembrance as well in the process. I really like working with the collections at our own institution because they have this immediate local resonance and relevance for students, who have at least some attachment to the history of the school they're attending. Even when archives and institutions are seriously limited, like ours, by their colonial nature, by the exclusions in admissions.

That's an object of inquiry for us as well. Our school, for instance, has been predominantly White. It's on this historic colonial center. It was only co-educational in the 1960s. Why do these silences and omissions and exclusions exist in the historical record of our institution? Not abstractly, but in our archives, we can see that, we can localize it. Where are you in the archives or not? Those really powerful questions that we can be engaging.

Some activities that I've used in the classroom to get to that, to bring that relevance and that personal stakes into it, one of them is the digital librarian at my school actually, Summer Shetenhelm, helped to develop a tweet composing exercise in this vein. Where students take an item from a digital or physical collection that we're looking at, because all of the work that we're doing with archives has of course been in digital archives recently, in our digital collections. I mean, that's a really interesting transformation.

What I used to like to do was to really examine the differences between engaging physical archives and digital archives and having that be part of the work we did. So students can select an item from a digital or physical collection, and they were asked to compose a tweet about its relevance to some online audience. Just a really basic activity, a really easy one. It took one afternoon. But it led students to beginning to answer for themselves that nagging question of who cares. No, like really, who cares, tag them. What does this have to do with something that people today care about? What does this old course catalog have to do with some issue that is in the public discourse right now?

Another activity that we do is to encourage students to engage with archives by thinking about the textual traces of their own lives, physical and digital. We often begin archival research processes by a practice of what I call self-curation, where students might select and interpret a set of artifacts that they think represent their literacies and identities. Reflect on what a researcher 100 years from now might understand, or not, or might misunderstand as a result of coming across that body of textual traces in the future.

Because that's what we're doing, we're coming across this random collection of traces and trying to piece together stories as a result. So even when you have control over what would be in your archive, how does that both reveal and conceal aspects of your experience and your history for potential researchers. And that helps students to be more critical and ethical researchers when they're then representing other people's lives and documents as well. It helps them, again, to see the ways that those documents are people as well, and they are past lives.

SW: Your book, A Shared History: Writing in the High School, College, and University, 1856-1886, explores the relationship between different educational formations in the US and how we think about high school and college writing today, especially in relation to dual credit and concurrent enrollment. Can you talk more about your motivations behind this book, and what you hope readers and teachers and students will take away from it?

AJL: The book was grounded initially, in terms of the motivations behind it, in this simple archival moment of my own. This discovery, which was the 1860 exam questions for two local high schools called Male High School and Female High School in Louisville, where I was doing my PhD. What motivated this research and the eventual book was simply my attempt to understand how these schools were being conceptualize and what they meant in their own historical moment. In relation to one another, and to the role of gender in that initially was one thing I was interested in and in relation to other educational forms and practices in the history of rhetorical education that I was trying to understand.

As I started to do even minor initial research on these schools from this paper, the exam papers, I just got really confused fast because the terminology and the organizational structure they were describing. They were sometimes called higher schools, sometimes they used the term higher learning, other times they were talking about seminary or college even university, and they were sometimes talking about a place or other times talking more about the curriculum. I just couldn't track which terms seem to indicate what, which is a basic thing to try to attend to as someone who studies language and rhetoric, not to mention trying to study history.

What motivated me initially was just this puzzle and my desire to figure out why these schools' practices seemed to contradict or complicate so much of what I had understood 19th century rhetorical education and practice to do. They just did not map on to the other histories that I had read that were focusing primarily on overtly college level institutions. It wasn't clear to me that they weren't college level. It wasn't clear to me that it should be separated. But instead it was complicating the story that I had encountered from that other perspective.

As I proceeded in the research process, it transformed into this broader insight less about finding this or that exception to what I thought I knew and correcting the record, which is where I began, and turned instead to a focus on the instability of these categories. The futility of that effort to pin down these boundaries and borders to these educational practices and sites.

The slippages started to become the point, the “blurred boundaries.” That was a possible title idea originally, or *Composing the High School* was my other one. You get that sense of process. My publisher had other ideas. But as I was working on the book after the dissertation research, I just became more interested too in the difference that race and gender makes in the permeability or the impermeability of those boundaries as well. What we allow, where we decide to uphold those boundaries and where we decide to stretch them.

That's very much what the book is about as well. It's not the actual practices that have defined these institutions and shaped their status and designations. But in fact, these other kinds of considerations of policing certain bodies, certain student bodies. We need to examine that history and that legacy into the present. What I hope readers will take away from the book is that educational processes, practices, have always been more complexly constituted than we want to believe. And that educators in the schools have been theorizing that complexity since the beginning, and working against those boundaries from their different positions. Pretty much every reform and innovation in fact is a return to some insight or effort that educators from the past have already had.

The expectation of uniformity practice and the shorthands we've come up with to characterize historical practices and particular sites, this process that I was engaging in myself as a historian, as a historiographer, that's part of what's limited that process and not allowed us to see those returns. The boundaries we conceptually are drawing around these practices, that's part of what obscures those innovations from our view and makes them harder to enact in the classroom. They're really part of the problem. By the end of the book, and especially in subsequent work that I've been doing with Brice Nordquist, who's at Syracuse, I've been really interested in the ways the emergent, contingent, fluent mobility of practice that are enacted in classrooms in schools, can't be confined to these categories or containers. And how that's just really the wrong way to think about education.

It's what sociolinguists, Gal & Irvine, called boundary-ing activities. That's that focus on boundaries or containers, rather than on the activities themselves that are supposedly being contained. It's really about looking not at the high school and college as already existing containers, but instead considering the ways that they have been and are being created into the present.

SW: Amy, this is my last question. This notion and understanding of boundary is really interesting. How would you encourage teachers and students to reconsider institutional boundaries and classroom walls and borders? What future directions would you like to see the field of writing studies take in erasing educational lines and building relationships between different learning environments, like high school and college?

AJL: Yeah, this is such an important question that I have only the beginnings of an answer to. But I think that part of that process is simply noticing and acknowledging that boundary-ing activity and our own participation in it. Noticing the ways we reify those boundaries in our own discourse, in our own approaches to the classroom, to the writing that we're doing. The ways we talk about writing in the classroom or outside, the way we talk about college school literacies, community literacies. And just really attending to it.

Again, I think the work of erasing educational lines or boundaries and building relationships between different education spaces comes from then focusing on emergent practices and processes of learning and unlearning. Moving away from a hierarchically ordered, tightly scaffolded, contained conception of what education is across grade levels, and towards just a messier model of repeated encounters that is just really emergent and enacted.

I want to acknowledge in this that I know that's a kind of frustrating thing for people in K12 spaces to hear. I've heard this before that, “Well, yeah, sure. That'd be lovely. But that is not our reality in K12 context, where we have these rigid testing requirements, this really standardized experience as an ideal, and that's very real.” But even without changes or immediate changes to that system, I just don't think we have to buy it as an accurate description of how learning proceeds.

Yes, I believe in scaffolding individual assignments and learning experiences, I do that. I know there is a progressive process of learning on some level, but it's on an individual level. And even then it's not linear. So when it comes to scaling educational experiences across time and space, it's just an illusion, and one that's stopping us from noticing and valuing and supporting other ways of practicing literacy and learning.

Again, I think part of the reconsideration of boundaries and borders comes from breaking that contained, containerized conception of educational leveling, progressive courses, grade levels, learning outcomes, as the model. And more focus on transfer and overlaps and relationality, intentions and friction in the literacy practices and practices that teachers and students are enacting. Articulating with what comes before and what comes after in our students' futures is just, again, not the best focus to me. It's not as good as focusing on what they're doing right now. What are their experiences and habits of mind that they might practice to draw on the language of the framework for success, which is a document that I cite in the book.

I like that approach, especially when it helps us break from this reified notion of college level or grade level or whatnot as tough…they are discreet and never overlapping. That's where I'd like to see the field go.

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