

Episode 117: Anastatia Curley

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Anastatia Curley talks about the first-year writing program at the University of Virginia, curriculum and pedagogical development, mentoring instructors, and teaching a graduate practicum pedagogy course.

Anastatia Curley is the Associate Director of the Writing and Rhetoric Program at the University of Virginia, where she works with graduate students teaching both first-year writing and writing in the disciplines and teaches courses in first-year writing, pedagogy, and contemporary literature. The question that animates her work is how do we connect, whether in the classroom, within an institution, in digital spaces, or with a character in a novel? And how do those connections foster learning? She pursues these questions through research in both pedagogy and contemporary literature.

Anastatia, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You're the Associate Director for the Pedagogy, Writing, and Rhetoric Program at the University of Virginia. I was hoping we could start by you sharing more about the writing program at UVA.

AC: So we have a kind of an interesting structure where we're within the English department... the English department at UVA is a big department. There's about 70 faculty, literature...and it's a really strong literature program. Then there's also a creative writing program at UVA that is also a really strong program. And then the writing and rhetoric program sort of sit within the English department. What that means is that, well, it means a number of things. One of them is that we are situated in a context where we have our literature colleagues and we have our creative writing colleagues and there's room for a lot of cross pollination between these different approaches, which I think is really valuable. But also the thing about our program is that we're now at about 23 full-time faculty members in the writing and rhetoric program. And that's a really recent development.

Starting in about 2014-2015 when we hired Jim Seitz, who's now a professor, but he was the Director for a number of years, and he really pushed for and successfully managed to make ENWR 1510, which is our first-year writing course...first-year academic writing, we call it "Writing and Critical Inquiry"...to make that a universal requirement for all students in the College of the Arts and Sciences. There's about 16,000 undergrads at UVA. So we're talking about 4,000 taking...it's a little fewer than that because they're in different schools, but we've got a lot of people taking writing every year. With that requirement came up a lot of hiring, so our program has really grown. At least like 15 of those 23 people were hired in the past 5-7 years.

The program has existed institutionally for a long time, but in its current form, it's really only existed for the past 5-7 years. So we're young, we're growing, it's an exciting time. And what that also means is that I think really because of where we sit within the university and because there's not a comp/rhet PhD at UVA either...so it's a field that is not necessarily as legible at UVA as it could be, or as it is at other institutions.

I say all that to say that our faculty of 23, some of us have MFAs; some people have PhDs in composition and rhetoric and the people who have PhDs in composition and rhetoric come from a range of different fields within that; and then a bunch of us have English PhDs. I, for instance, have a PhD in English. I wrote my dissertation on the contemporary novel. So we come from these different backgrounds to the teaching of writing. I think that really shapes both how we teach, how we run the program, and what we're trying to give to undergraduates.

SW: Given this growing and dynamic nature of the first-year writing program, including the diverse faculty interests and backgrounds, I'm interested in hearing more about what guides curricular development. What's the larger writing program philosophy? And what are some of your goals as an administrator in terms of curriculum?

AC: That's a big question. I would say, first of all, my sort of administrative philosophy, as a teacher, as an administrator, is this desire to balance a respect for individuals with a sort of commitment to the common good. That's not like a revolutionary administrative philosophy. I'm sure plenty of administrators share this approach, but I think that's particularly important in a program that's as sort of diverse in terms of background as ours is because what I think...what I want to do and what our program wants to do is to be able to celebrate the diversity, to celebrate the different approaches that we bring without it obviously being just chaos, or just sort of like a free for all. That, I think, is both like the joy and the challenge of this program because at its best, what it means is that we are getting to talk to people with really different backgrounds and that's informing our teaching in exciting ways.

And that's been true for me, right? My colleagues who have comp/rhet PhDs, who I talk with have really changed the way that I approach teaching. I think that's true for a lot of us as well, right? The key is kind of balancing that desire for individual flourishing with the common good and since it is a universal requirement, creating a situation in which the freshmen we call them first-years at UVA actually are not just having wildly different experiences across their ENWR 1510 classes. The way we do that...we've actually this year been kind of revising our program goals. That's been a yearlong process with a number of the faculty in the Writing and Rhetoric program...really collaborating to create a new set of administrative goals. So that's another way we do stuff. We really do work collaboratively.

Our program goals grow out of the committees of faculty rather than coming down from the sort of higher up administration. I think that's an important part of how we do what we do, and why the goal is to have those be meaningful and accessible for everyone: students, professors, but

also to be things that can be fulfilled in different ways by different people. Right? So in some sense, at the sort of at the center of our program, I would say is the idea of writing as a form of inquiry. So our ENWR 1510 class is called “Writing and Critical Inquiry,” and so what we are doing in each of our classes is helping our students see that writing is not just a product or a way of delivering knowledge or packaging knowledge, but is also a way of gaining knowledge, a way of exploring their ideas, deepening their ideas.

That is sort of central to the critical inquiry piece. We also have a lot of people on our faculty whose backgrounds are in community engagement and who are really committed to that. So we also think a lot about the ways that writing forms communities, deepens communities, forms connections. It's a social act, as well as an intellectual act with all of the kind of potential ramifications of any social act, right? You can be reinforcing social norms, you can be challenging social norms. So this sense of writing as inquiry...there are a lot of ways you can approach that as a teacher. One of the ways that our curriculum works is that we're all under the banner of writing and critical inquiry, but we have different topics through which we explore these issues. I think one way that people kind of get to have their individual approach as teachers....so we have people teaching, you know, writing about food, writing about Charlottesville, which is where UVA is based, all sorts of stuff. That's one way that by changing the topic, you can kind of approach the issues in a different way depending on your own background.

SW: There's a range of folks teaching first-year writing at UVA from graduate students to full-time faculty with diverse educational backgrounds and expertise. So a lot of different kinds of experience and people in different stages of their teaching career. Has there been a method or framework that has worked well to help mentor instructors or to help build this sense of community of teachers within the writing program?

AC: Yeah, so that happens at a number of levels. I would say first of all, coming in as an assistant professor, because we have these really wonderful senior faculty who have backgrounds and composition in rhetoric, when you come in as assistant professor, you do get a faculty mentor who can sort of help you both navigate coming to UVA and also help you think about your teaching. And what's nice about that is that they tend to be someone who does not necessarily share your exact pedagogical and scholarly background. There's a kind of cross pollination there that they can, they're more experienced, but you might have a knowledge base that they don't have. I think that opens up an interesting conversation there at that level within the faculty. We also do have...I should say at UVA, an incredible Center for Teaching Excellence, which is separate from the English department, separate from the writing program, but many of us on the faculty do a lot of work with them. I've taken their seminars. There's a really great knowledge base about teaching over there.

You can come at it from a number of different directions. They do a lot of work with contemplative practices, for instance, that some of our faculty have engaged with. So there's a kind of...you might call it almost like a horizontal or lateral mentorship or professional

development piece there for the faculty and for the graduate students as well that that's available to them. I would also say that we do a lot at the administrative level within the program to try to foster relationships. I think I mentioned this earlier, but so much of our work is done through committees. So groups of faculty getting together, sharing their different perspectives and putting forth, you know, proposals or goals or sets of resources for people.

So that's another way that we really try to make sure that we're both mining the different kinds of expertise and also making sure that people are talking to each other that they're not siloed. That's something that our director I think is really good at is listening to people and creating spaces for conversations. So that's the sort of faculty level. In terms of the graduate students, that's really where most of my work is focused is in working with the graduate students, because we do have every year for a substantial portion of our ENWR 1510 classes are taught by graduate students. Often many of them are teaching for the first time or at least teaching academic writing for the first time. This coming fall, we have 23 new instructors starting off and they'll each have one or two classes to teach.

So that's a big group...and it's also a group, it's a diverse group again, right? We have students who are getting PhDs in English literature. We have students who are getting MFAs in creative writing, either poetry or fiction. And we have MAs who are getting a terminal degree in English literature with a pedagogy concentration, the teaching of literature, the teaching of writing, right? So again, kind of this multiple...so none of these people have come to graduate school with the intention of teaching academic writing, right? The people we do not have are rhet/comp. So it's interesting helping them understand how to do it. It's a project, and it's one that I've really been excited to take on as someone who, again, has a PhD in literature and English literature, but who over the course of graduate school just became, in some ways, much more interested in teaching first-year writing because I think it's the most fun course to teach.

So helping other graduate students through that transition. I'm not saying they have to become writing people, but helping them navigate the ways that it can be different to teach writing than to teach literature is really what I do. And the way we do that is before they start teaching, they take a semester long pedagogy course. It's a regular three credit course. I'm teaching one section of it and Steph Ceraso is teaching the other section. So we have two classes of about 12 students. We can really help them and devote attention to them, and that's a general pedagogy course. It culminates in a syllabus for a first-year writing course. It really is focused on teaching first-year writing, but it's also a kind of ongoing conversation about what it means to be in a classroom, what it means to try to motivate students through the lens of first-year writing.

I find real joy to teach because we have students from different backgrounds sharing their ideas and finding that they have kind of ways to help each other. Usually our creative writing MFAs are really good at workshopping. They know how to do that. They know how to help students do that, which is something the PhD students tend to be a little bit more nervous about because it's not engaging with student writing in the classroom...doesn't really happen in the literature classroom nearly as much. So the MFAs can help the PhDs with that. The PhDs are more

comfortable in, you know, an “academic setting.” The MFAs are sometimes nervous about like, “I’m not an academic, I’m not a scholar. How do I help students do that?” I think that back and forth the MAs and the PhDs are...the MFAs can say like, “Okay, we know how students can converse with each other about their writing.” I’ve found that dialogue is really fruitful and there are other ways it pops up. That’s just kind of the most obvious one that I’ve seen in these different groups.

But once the graduate students take that pedagogy course, and that have that kind of prep, they are assigned a mentor. We have this mentoring program that we’ve built, which is every person teaching writing for the first time is placed in a group of about three first-time teachers. They have a mentor who’s an experienced graduate student to kind of help them work through whatever they need help with as they go through the semester. And that I think is valuable in part because teaching as a graduate student is different from teaching as a faculty member.

I am always happy to talk to our grad student teachers, but I think it’s really good for them to have someone who is closer to their position to kind of help them brainstorm, help them think about the challenges they’re facing in ways that, you know, I can try to help....I want to say I was a grad student fairly recently, but it gets farther and farther away year by year. So my sense of being a young person will go so far, but that is throughout their first year of teaching. They have access to this mentor group and what I do...I work with the mentors as a group and we meet, you know, once or twice a month and talk about, “Okay, what are the things that the current new teachers are probably going to be challenged with this month?” Often in September, it’s like lesson planning, “Do we need to create workshops on lesson planning?” Because that’s always a challenge.

Towards the end of September, it becomes grading. They’re getting in their first batch of papers. Oh, that’s a big moment. How can we help them think about how to grade and respond to student writing? And then there are sort of...we usually help them think about sort of uncomfortable moments in the classroom, but there are...if you’re a teacher, you know, as you go through the semester, what the challenges are going to be at a particular point. And we try to sort of anticipate those for the new teachers in that mentor program. It’s a lot. We also have faculty observations. We have a committee in the writing and rhetoric program that’s called the Pedagogy committee that really thinks about things about pedagogy, but also we have faculty members observe every new teacher to help them think about what they’re doing.

That’s really intended more as a formative visit than a summative assessment because they really are new teachers...but we were actually, we were trained by the Center for Teaching Excellence in how to observe a class. And it’s very much...they really advocate for sort of descriptive observation. And that is what we try to do as faculty members to see what the graduate students are doing. That’s another opportunity for sort of connection across disciplines, because many of the faculty members who are doing the observations have comp/rhet PhDs and the students who are being observed are literature students often. That’s an opportunity for a conversation that wouldn’t necessarily otherwise occur within the structure of the English department and is an

opportunity for relationships to form for advice to be exchanged. I know that both our grad students and our faculty have found that really rewarding...that observation.

So that's another place that there's a kind of mentorship cross pollination. And the other thing I would say is that, you know, I'm talking about the first-time teachers, but the group of mentors, right, I oversee this group of graduate students who are later on in their PhDs...there's about nine of them a year. They are in this interesting position where they get to help new graduate students. They also, some of them serve on some of the writing program committees, so they get to see how the faculty collaborate and how the faculty think about pedagogy. And they get to really deepen their engagement with writing pedagogy over the course of a literature PhD. We try to give them that kind of space to think about writing pedagogy that they wouldn't otherwise find in a literature PhD. I think that's, you know, it's a very multifaceted set of programs and set of relationships, but that's sort of how we try to mentor and communicate across all those different populations.

SW: How do you go about building a sense of investment in rhetoric and composition in your grad practicum pedagogy class with students who study literature and creative writing? How do you navigate that space and build this visibility of writing studies as a field while also trying to amplify the value of teaching composition, and then while also trying to provide pedagogical resources for first-time teachers?

AC: Investment is a good word. And I think almost universally there's the occasional outlier, but almost universally our students come in with a sense of investment. Our graduate students come in with a sense of investment in teaching, right? They care about teaching. They care about their students. I think especially what I've seen in the past couple of years has really been this almost activist mentality on the part of the graduate students to, you know, particularly to mentor students from underrepresented populations, right. To kind of challenge the hierarchies of the institution. I think there's already this investment in teaching and in students. There's maybe less of an investment in thinking about academic writing. But I think that you can, you can get from the one to the other, right. It's pretty easy. I always start this semester by asking them to write about their experience as a student, their experience as a teacher, if they have any, their, their kind of hopes and fears, and you learn a lot from what they say there.

Again, almost universally, there is real investment in the idea of teaching. I really do try to build on, you know, "You guys care about your students, you care about teaching, even if you're not here to teach academic writing, let's talk about the ways that you can learn from the field of composition and rhetoric pedagogy to be better teachers in whatever you do." That's usually how I frame it because I really do think again, you know, I think it helps that I don't have a rhet/comp PhD, you know. Steph Ceraso teaches it, and she does, so she would maybe have a different perspective, but I think it does help that I can say, "You know, I'm not invested in this field as a scholar of it, but I can say to you, I have learned so much from this different field. What can you learn?"

I think that personal-interpersonal dynamic helps a lot. But I also think that what I get are a lot of students...this is less true of the creative writers, but especially the PhDs who come in with a real sense of teaching as a passing on of expertise from one person to another. It's a little bit like banking concept of education, right? Because hierarchy is so important in the academy, and they're so invested in a certain kind of hierarchy. The challenge is usually trying to help them see beyond that model of teaching, which I think again is more prevalent in people who get degrees in literature than just because comp/rhet has a different philosophy of teaching, a different philosophy of knowledge. Almost. It's not so much like The Sage, you know, in a room who like knows absolutely everything about Milton and your job is just to listen at his feet.

The way I usually do it is to say, "Look, we have research on how learning works. You don't know about it because it's not your field, but I can bring this research on how people learn to write and share it with you." And also say, "Okay, you're invested in helping them learn to write here's the best practices for doing it." I think what I usually try to do in a nutshell is really just to bridge from their desire to teach their care from their students, with a kind of, "Oh, composition and rhetoric scholarship gives you a kind of set of best practices for doing that." And they get excited about that because it also gives them a language for things that they didn't necessarily have a language for before. I did a day or two on sort of Rhetorical Genre Studies with my graduate students and had them read some about how that could help them with their pedagogy. And they were so they loved it. I think maybe particularly the creative writers were like, "Okay, so academic writing is just a genre. I know how to teach towards a genre. Now I can just use this knowledge from this field to build on what I can already do." I don't know that was kind of a long answer, but I think that's how I try to work in this setting.

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