

## Episode 78: Ashanka Kumari

### Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Ashanka Kumari about how she came to be a writing teacher, her pedagogies and classroom values, self-care and issues of power, collaboration, mobility, and graduate student professionalization.

Ashanka Kumari is Director of Writing, Assistant Professor of English, and Global Human Rights Fellow at Texas A&M University – Commerce. She recently published the co-edited collection *Mobility Work in Composition* with Bruce Horner, Megan Faver Hartline, and Laura Sceniak Matravers. Her writing has appeared in a plethora of scholarly journals, books, as well as journalism across media. To learn more about her scholarship, you can visit her website at [ashankakumari.com](http://ashankakumari.com).

Ashanka, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: So I really enjoy talking and listening to people talk about their histories and educational backgrounds, how they became a writing teacher or how they came to be a writing teacher, and how they got interested in rhetoric and composition. So who or what has influenced you? Is there a mentor, a book, a colleague? Do you mind talking a little bit more about your educational journey, and what has informed your pedagogical beliefs and values?*

AK: So I am an Indian-American person, a woman. That's how I identify. I identify also as a child of immigrants. My parents both immigrated to the US in the late '80s, early '90s, and I was born in the early '90s. I'm aging myself a bit. So there's been a lot of influence in my household of just thinking about the value of education, how I might engage with teachers. I remember when I was really young, kindergarten, my dad's advice for my first day of school was, "Make sure you say good morning every single day to all your teachers, and ask any questions you have, because it's okay to ask," always reinforcing that it's okay to ask questions, because that's how he made it here, right? He made it to America by asking and finding ways to get to where he is now. That's how he found spaces for me.

I'm also the oldest child, so I've always been the one to kind of set up our understanding of education at home. Whatever I would bring home were some of the literacies that I was sharing with my family. It helped my brother teach him English and those sorts of things, right? Because English was my third language. So I didn't know it going in, either.

So questions are always a thing I try to ask students to do as well, right? I know it's like cliché, "There's no such thing as a dumb question," but there really isn't. Whenever students ask questions, I try my hardest not to say anything negative about it, because I'm like, "No, that's a question probably everyone in the room has and is afraid to ask, and that is awesome." I want to celebrate all those questions, right?

So thinking about my family first, just the first gen-ness, I'm a first-generation student in a family where learning literacy is not just for me, but also thinking about helping my family understand what it means to be in America, to think about education, what that means for upward mobility, sort of. I don't really like that phrasing anymore, but just moving through the systems that we need to get through to survive, frankly. I've had a lot of different kinds of teachers.

I grew up in New York City. I was born in New York City, but we moved to north Alabama when I was nine years old, which are very starkly different environments. I often call it a reverse culture shock, because it was a very culturally diverse environment in New York, where I never really recognized how difference was happening, because everybody was, right? We all are different. I don't even know that there is any other way, then going to Alabama, where it was like I stood out as a sore thumb, because I was like the only in all my classrooms or whatever that is.

But just having that kind of array of experiences from the North, from the South, and then moving to Nebraska for my master's, then moving to Kentuckiana, Louisville for my PhD. Indiana is where I lived, and now in Texas. I've gotten a lot of different moments of learning in those spaces. I honestly learn a lot both from the positive teachers I've had and the less so positive experiences, because I think that I learn from failure quite a lot. I think a lot about how can we grow on failure? I think it's Margaret Price that talks about that a bit as well.

I've had such a range of teachers not just in English classes, but also my band directors, thinking about how we might foster communities and working together in a band classroom and making music and doing those things. In a similar way, we might do that in our writing classroom with writing or research and sharing our ideas and that sort of thing. So just an array of experiences that have helped.

I try really hard to be the teacher that I always wanted, and that's not to say I didn't have good teachers. I had so many good teachers, but it's that there's a great quality in so many. I want to make the class kind of like a gumbo of those things, right? Pulling some of the best of all the worlds, and I don't think there's such a thing as a perfect teacher. That's not something I'm trying to be, ever, but I think there are values, like openness and empathy and flexibility, that can help really support classroom spaces, both on the teacher side and the student side and beyond, right?

*SW: This is a broad question. I'll let you take it in whatever direction you want to, but I want to give us the chance to peek into your writing classroom. What practices do you use or draw from as a writing teacher?*

AK: This is maybe cliché, but I use a very student-first centered practice, right? Actually, the second slide on my first day PowerPoint, it stays in that space for multiple weeks, sometimes the whole semester. It just says, "You matter." That's all it says. On the first slide is the typical title slide. But then I flip to that slide, and I leave it up there for a while, because I want to start every semester by just telling students, "First and foremost, we need to think about you." I think a lot of what we do in the classroom can only be productive or helpful if we're prioritizing the needs of students first. I know that a lot of us in the discipline feel that way, but those are some of the ways I try to show that in my spaces.

More practically speaking, I use a lot from a Black feminist and cultural rhetorics approach. I think a lot about scholarship and Patricia Hill Collins and what I learned from Drs. Della Mosley and Pearis Bellamy at the Academics for Black Lives and Wellness Institute last summer. It's very much a relational approach, right? I work with students in thinking about their own positioning and how they're connecting ideas in the classroom and how we're seeing one another and recognizing our own identities along the way, both the connections within and across, right?

We also talk a lot about power, and it's clear there's power manifesting in different ways in the classroom, whether that's in the readings and how we're thinking about who we're reading and whether that person is established or not, but also just physical power in the space, right? In the classroom, I tend to be the teacher that if we're in a physical classroom, I walk around. I'm very much the on my feet kind of teacher, and that creates a physical power differential. The students are sitting typically, right? Sometimes I sit with them, if they're presenting. I will join them in the space. It's like my way of trying to shift the power, but I know it's never going to be perfect, right? So we think a lot about power and how that impacts our community and how we're going to engage with one another, but also with the things that we're looking at and things that we're researching.

I'm finding myself thinking more and more about self-care, even more prioritizing mental health in the classroom and having as honest of conversations I can with students about those things, because to say everything we're doing is important, sure, in the classroom, but it can only go so far as we can engage it and take care of ourselves along the way.

So yeah, I try to make sure I'm always asking students where they are, and I do a lot of regular check-ins, not just in the beginning and ends of classes, but also via emails. Even though I don't care about attendance in the literal sense of counting it as a grade, I do always take attendance, and that's just my way of kind of keeping track of who's there and who's not. It will never impact their grade, but I use that as a way to kind of check in. I'm like, "Oh, I haven't heard from this person in weeks. They haven't turned in a thing. Are they okay?" Sometimes just doing that, because it goes so far, and I don't need to know all the details of students' lives at all, but those are some of the things I do in my classroom to try to maintain the human first, the realness, or the we in the room or the you in the room, right?

*SW: So you emphasize self-care, and as a classroom community, you talk about issues of power. Those are two kind of larger themes of your pedagogy, and a lot of this has to do with how you position yourself as a teacher and the conversations you ask students to engage in. Is there a particular assignment or reading that helps you do this work?*

AK: Yeah, so I'm thinking of three things, actually. So one, is a week one assignment that I do where I ask students to create a slide, a visual, some kind of thing, a one and done kind of situation where they have to include at least three images that represent themselves, no words. Then we use that as a way to present everyone in the space. As students are presenting, I try to make the connections in the space, like "Does anyone else have dogs? Does anyone..." to just try to create that conversation. That's usually when students will find one another in the space, especially when it's the physical space. When I used to teach at Louisville during my PhD, a lot of students found that they worked in similar jobs, and they had never met. That was always an

interesting way to create community week one, right, and learn names as well. Creating slides also creates a visual association, right?

The second thing that came to mind is we always watch Chimamanda Adichie's "Danger of a Single Story" in week one, and I talk with students about what that means in terms of thinking about power relations, but also how we think about all the topics we're going to discuss, that there's not always just one way in or there's going to be multiple perspectives that we're going to be engaging. More and more, the third thing I'm thinking about Asao Inoue's antiracist reading practices. I've been using that more and more since that piece came out in the last year, having students doing more pausing, reflecting, writing, just taking a moment, thinking about where they are in relation to the thing that we're doing and what that means for us.

I have been foregrounding that as a learning, unlearning, relearning approach. So various times of the semester, I ask students, "What is something that you learned or relearned as you've been reading, as you've been engaging, or unlearned?," because I think a lot of these things require us to continue to assess and reassess our own practices. I try to model it, but also ask students to do it as directly as I can, literally in writing prompts during classroom, usually more "low stakes" activities that can feel high stakes, but they're not graded.

*SW: So your teaching and research is extremely collaborative. You've co-written articles, co-presented at conferences, and have been involved in numerous professional collaborations and initiatives. This feels super intentional. I'm interested in hearing more about what draws you into this collaborative work and what stands out to you the most about it.*

AK: I don't know if it was intentional from the beginning, right? I think it just became something that I was always drawn to, and I found that I enjoyed it more than working by myself, not to say that I can't work alone. I do that, too, but there's just something about having a space of people thinking and sharing ideas and people with all different strengths and weaknesses and experiences, right, and just learning from one another and then doing something with that. There's a different kind of energy that just happens in a space where we can bounce ideas off of one another. It makes me think of writing centers, right? I think writing centers are a great model of this, and that is somewhere I have not worked is a writing center, but I definitely lived in them as a graduate student in particular.

Sometimes it becomes a what doesn't draw me to collaborative work? Because the people are part of the reason why we do some of the things we do, right? Research is going to people. It's going to communities. So by doing it with the people, I think it's better, and it makes us better to kind of learn from one another. I learn new stuff every time that I can then pass forward to the next project or to the next community.

I talk with students a lot about the value of collaboration, and when we talk about group work and I'm like, "I know group work has this negative rap of being historically not the favorite thing of everyone. There's all the terrible versions of it on television that we see of the one person does all the work, et cetera. But these are the things we can do with group work that we cannot do alone that we need each other's strengths and experiences to learn." So those are a couple of things that come to mind. Yeah, so I thrive in those spaces.

*SW: Let's talk about your co-edited book, *Mobility and Composition: Translation, Migration, and Transformation*. Can you talk about how this work contributes to rhetoric and composition studies at large and what writing teachers can do with this collection or how this collection offers them new ways to think about teaching and to think about mobility?*

AK: Mobility's work is pulling from a mobilities paradigm, which comes from Sheller and Urry. I can't remember what year, so I apologize for that. But it's about thinking beyond movement, like literal movement. When we think of mobility, sometimes we think of literal movement, but it's different than that, right? It's not just thinking about what is considered outside a norm, which is how sometimes movement is thought of, right? But it's thinking of more of a fluid concept, so thinking of how a classroom is more than just gaining skills or learning transfer to work toward different spaces, right? But it's more than that in the sense that we have to think about how we're impacted by or have impact on other spaces. Places, interfaces, whatever, what have you, and how we move in and across and about as we do that work. That has to stay fluid, because it's always changing, right?

In some of the chapters, I'm thinking of John Scenters-Zapico's chapter, where he talks about literally moving jobs and how your CV ends up being this constantly transforming thing that, oh, and then I'm thinking of Carmen Kynard and Rebecca Lorimer Leonard's chapters, where they're talking about students are moving in their classrooms. They're moving across projects and thinking about their own identities or their own relationships with one another.

So in those ways, mobility becomes a really useful concept for classroom thinking, and it's not just that everyone comes to the classroom in different ways. Yes, we know that deep down, but what we do with that, right? How do we give students space to work with the things that they're coming from, the different literacies, the different languages? None of this is static, and none of it should be static. It should be dynamic and moving and adaptable and flexible, right?

*SW: Your research and teaching also includes graduate student preparation and professionalization, so really supporting and advocating for grad students. I think that we're at a pivotal moment in grad school education in rhetoric and composition, thinking through the job market, thinking about where teaching writing happens, talking about funding and financial aid and support, talking about or listening to experiences of grad students, talking about labor conditions and teaching loads and coursework, inequities, alternative routes and professions, re-imagining traditional grad seminars, re-imagining traditional practices like oral exams and comps, et cetera. It's a long list, and there's a lot of them to reconsider and rethink about in graduate school and higher education. Are there specific practices or policies that you feel like graduate programs should reconsider to better support graduate students in the 21st century?*

AK: Where do I start? I have lots of feelings about this. So in my research, I'll start with research. My dissertation focused on first-generation to college doctoral students, specifically in rhetoric and composition and the ways they navigate academia with their lives, because I started with the idea that it's already interesting that students are first generation to college, but why in the world do we keep going? That's including myself. I was both the researcher and the participant in my own study of 22 doctoral students, because it's interesting to think, "What

keeps us here in academia, of all places?” Right? Or even thinking academic-related, academic-adjacent.

It becomes more and more clear that from my participants and from what I learned in that project is that we need better mentoring support systems. I'm not just talking about mentoring in the sense of bodies working with bodies, people working with people. I'm thinking also about financial support. A lot of us don't have the means or the understandings of what that looks like long-term. We might not be working with really strong financial understandings at all. So even creating those spaces of literacy learning for that in graduate programs can be really productive.

Here, we've had conversations very frankly with graduate students where they literally share their paychecks with one another, and that's a really hard thing to do, because we're not “supposed to talk about money.” But we do, and we do it as frankly as we can, because that's how we learn when systems aren't working. We learn that someone's paying too much or we learn that someone's not getting something that they're supposed to be getting, because we learned that through seeing the cracks in the system, right? The system might not even know those cracks are there, because they might not be paying attention. But if we can see those things upfront, we start to advocate for those things.

I think one of the big things I'm learning more and more over time is that first we have to start with livable wages. I know that's not the easiest thing to say, but it should be. It shouldn't be difficult to at least give students a livable wage where they're not having to work two or three jobs to support themselves, but we're not causing more debt on top of debt, because that hurts, right? We also have to remember that not all students are here for an academic professor job. But there are other alternatives to what that looks like post-master's, post-PhD. But if we're really engaged in having folks continue in the field that do that kind of research service, publishing work, we have to think about how we're asking them to engage so much financially.

I get stuck a lot on the finance question, because I think that even though money can't buy happiness, it can create certain mobilities, right? Scholarships help us get through programs. Then jobs help us live and function so that we can do our jobs, right? So that's one of the things I think we can do better as a discipline, is not just creating a one-off scholarship, but creating a system that continues to help people flourish and check in and help them think beyond that one moment of a scholarship, like, “Oh, I'm getting a \$1,000 to go to a conference. Then what? What do I do with that? How do I support you in publishing the work that you're presenting at the conference or thinking about creating a new thing or helping support the next person?”

I'm really fortunate here right now. I'm one of the Global Human Rights Fellows, and through that fellowship work, I decided to use that time to work on creating or a proposal to increase the stipends for students, particularly taking away all the fees that they have to pay, because the fees are hurting them long-term in a way that...frankly, they're not necessary all the time, to have students pay outrageous fees and they could be covered in other ways. I'm working on a proposal right now with the graduate research assistant to support that.

One thing we've been doing is looking at what are the comparable numbers for fellowships and things in comparable programs, but also thinking about programs that aren't exactly like us, but

are maybe ideals. How can we learn from programs that are maybe doing it better than us and are probably doing it better than us in terms of financial support, right? How can we get there? If we have this goal to be a stronger program, how can we get there by supporting students first?

If you keep us all happy in the finance world, lots of other beautiful things can happen, and I think that's where I get stuck sometimes in my thinking, is you have to start here with the livable means to do work before we can get to the work itself. In thinking about the systems that we're creating, we have to reassess those systems regularly, because I think the graduate student that was twenty years ago is not the graduate student that is now. Even me, I've only been out of grad school for three years, almost. The students that I'm working with are different than I am. They have different needs, different goals. A lot of them are older than me. So they also have different lives that they've had before grad school. I went straight through, so I had a very different experience.

So keeping those things in mind is that we have to keep reassessing with the new students that come in. I know that can be challenging, because sometimes what we're assessing now isn't going to impact the current. It impacts the next iteration. It can be difficult to make those projections, but just continuing to do that, we start to pick up on patterns, just like good researchers, right? We do that work and we start to notice, "Oh, eight people are doing it this way" or "This is the typical timeline, and these are the things that typically trip folks up" or "These are the things that aren't working," right? "This comp structure needs work," whatever that thing is. Assessment is so, so critical to that, and I don't think we give enough time or justice to thinking about not just assessment in our classrooms, but assessment of spaces and what that looks like as we move.

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