

Episode 94: Ashley J. Holmes

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Ashley J. Holmes about public pedagogy, community literacies, visual and digital rhetoric, multimodality, and writing across the curriculum.

Ashley J. Holmes is Associate Professor of English and Director of Writing Across the Curriculum at Georgia State University. Her book *Public Pedagogy in Composition Studies* (2016) was published with the Studies in Writing and Rhetoric series, and her articles have recently appeared in *The International Journal of Students as Partners* and *Composition Forum*. Her current book-length project, *Learning on Location*, explores place-based pedagogies through writing, walking (and other forms of movement), and engaging the civic. Holmes serves as Managing Co-Editor of *Composition Forum*.

Ashley, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: So your teaching and research focus on public pedagogy, and in your book, Public Pedagogy and Composition Studies, you write this, "Taking a public approach to composition pedagogy means facilitating students' understanding of the significance of learning that happens in public spaces that may be marked as nonschool, unacademic, or everyday" (5). Can you talk more about this approach to teaching writing and what you mean by public pedagogy?

*AJH: Sure. So first, Shane, just let me thank you for inviting me to be here. I really appreciate the opportunity to talk with you and just love what you're doing with the podcast, so thanks so much. So public pedagogy kind of emerged as an umbrella term for me, that helped capture kind of a number of approaches that I was seeing happening in the field that I thought were particularly valuable and of interest to me as a teacher. I'm thinking about Paula Mathieu's work in *Tactics of Hope*, she talks about that kind of public turn in the field, which is really well-established now. And so, what I hope to do in that book was really kind of...knowing that we were at a certain place where lots of people were doing public work, what can we do to better understand what we mean by this public turn? Taking kind of a snapshot of what's happening in classrooms.*

To kind of go back to the quote you mentioned, I think at the heart of public pedagogy is an understanding and valuing of the learning and literate practices that happen outside of school spaces. So much of our research, and it's really understandable why, but so much of our research is focused on what happens in the classroom and how to support students with school-based writing, academic writing practices. But I've always been interested in how we can leverage our time that we have with students in the academy to kind of help them make sense of and navigate the already rich writing lives that they have and bring to them or to the academy with them. I think to do that, we have to kind of acknowledge students as writers already and to use their experiences kind of as a resource for how we can teach writing.

So public pedagogy kind of like became this way for me to unite this set of teaching practices, things like service learning, civic engagement, community literacy, place-based and problem-based learning, social justice education. I loved all of those things and I wanted a term to kind of bring them together that helped us think about how we can leverage all the pieces of them to teach writing in the most effective ways.

For me, a lot of that comes back to inviting students to turn outward toward the public, rather than always inward into the academy with the kind of work that they do. What that can look like in terms of pedagogical practice can really vary from school to school and classroom to classroom. Even the different kinds of classes I teach, how public makes its way into what I teach can really vary. So sometimes that means building long term, sustainable, reciprocal partnerships with nonprofit organizations. That's kind of the ideal model in service learning, for instance. But the reality is that we have personal and professional obligations where we can't always scale up that level and to do it the right way without doing damage in partnership. So thinking about folks teaching four-fours and five-fives, how can we go public in a way that serves those teachers, students, those classrooms?

When I wrote *Public Pedagogy in Composition Studies*, I was really thinking about how can we kind of hold the good stuff from all these approaches, boil it down? I kind of talk in that book about three components: relocating student writing and experiences in kind of increasingly public spheres, valuing people, places, and knowledge beyond the university instead of always kind of going back to the library and the experts. What can we learn from the communities we're already in? Sometimes that involves engaging students with unfamiliar or risky publics to help them move towards more productive learning.

Kind of at the heart of all this has always been that I really value public writing, particularly when it has an experiential component that gets students kind of out of classroom space into community and local public space, which I think is really kind of one of the best ways to teach writing.

SW: You were talking about how this work varies depending on the institution and classroom context. Do you mind talking more about an assignment or a classroom practice that you use or draw on that encourages students to consider community literacy? For example, I'm thinking about the article you wrote on street art.

AJH: Yeah. So that was a really cool project. I'm glad you mentioned the article on street art. So I teach at Georgia State University in downtown Atlanta, and we had the privilege of bringing the artist, Tatyana Fazlalizadeh, whose project, "Stop Telling Women to Smile," was really blowing up right around, getting a lot of media attention and press right around the time we were able to host her on campus. I took a lot of inspiration from the work she was doing in the community. So Tatyana would interview women who experienced unwanted comments while walking down the street. Something that many women experience. So she would interview them about that and talk about what did you say back or what would you say back? And then she would pull phrases from them and create posters with their image, kind of a sketched image of the woman, and then their phrase that would speak back. Something like, "Stop telling women to smile."

She came to campus and gave some public talks that were open to the community and that my students attended. And what I love about that project is the way it really connects to what I do in the classroom to help students see that the public spaces that they're already in, like the literal walls they walk by on the way to campus or on the way to work, that those are really valuable sites for learning and for writing and for rhetoric. So part of what I try to teach students about community literacy is by exploring these kind of diverse literate practices of the communities that they're already a part of, as well as one that they're unfamiliar with in their community.

I do try to kind of draw on their own, to use a quote from some of the literature, kind of their funds of knowledge and how they can bring that to what we're learning. But also, how can we engage with difference and communities that are unfamiliar to us and kind of navigate and learn from, right?

So I do a lot of different kind of assignments that involve this kind of work. One I'll mention is a multimodal mapping assignment where I've taught it in a digital writing class, an upper division class, but I've also taught pieces of it in first year composition. So there's a few different pieces. I usually begin with students doing what I call a "write on location" invention activity, where it's like a place-based writing, like choose somewhere that's of rhetorical interest to you and go there and sit and write in that place. Really open-ended, like free write, what do you see? What do you observe? And so what are you thinking? How are you feeling? That kind of stuff. So we use those, I do kind of a series of them, and use those as kind of ways to pull out, well, what are the issues you're seeing in your community, and how can we use writing and rhetoric to respond to them?

That process has resulted in a lot of different assignments. Some public writing assignments, like writing a letter to a representative on an issue in your community, or this multimodal mapping assignment where students find their topic, then they actually go to multiple sites, create their own Google maps, drop pins. And then we use the Google map and dropped pins as the kind of base of their text in which they make a public argument about their issue. It's a real kind of non-traditional...it's not an essay assignment. That's been kind of a way in which students can engage with community, explore local issues that are important to them, do some work with digital technology, mapping. Place-based work has become really a big interest of mine, and so it incorporates that mapping.

I've had a student working with creeks and environmental issues around kind of garbage collecting in urban creeks in Atlanta. She did a really cool project mapping these kind of unknown sites that are behind apartment buildings and strip malls that people didn't even know a creek was back there in the middle of downtown Atlanta. So she did some cool mapping around that. I had a student do some work around public transit and doing some mapping around bus stops and accessibility. There's some cool projects that have come out of that, and that's one of the ways I invite students. Like the student who did the bus route project, that came out of his own experience riding a certain bus route, doing his writing on location on his phone while he was on the bus route. I'm really trying to meet students where they are and see their everyday lived experiences as a site for research and further exploration and writing and communication.

SW: So you're talking about this mapping project and public pedagogy, and in addition to this, your teaching focuses on visual rhetoric and digital writing. Can you talk more about the affordances of multimodality, visual rhetoric, digital writing, and specifically in a class like first-year composition?

AJH: Sure, absolutely. So actually, I think where I am right now is doing kind of an intersection of both of those things. It's a great question because I teach, we have an undergraduate concentration and rhetoric in composition. So we have an upper division course in visual rhetoric. We have an upper division course in digital writing. So those are fun places to really delve deeper, but I appreciate that you also connect it back to first-year composition because that is also a place where I engage with these concepts and build assignments for students. In part because I think visual and digital rhetoric is kind of a great way in for students. It can be kind of a fun, engaging way for them to connect their everyday lived experiences through popular texts, things they're seeing online, social media sites, posters, those sort of things that they're engaging with all the time.

The tricky part, and this is especially true with first-year writers, but it's also true with upper-division writers, is that because students are so deeply immersed in those kind of visual and digital texts on a daily basis, they approach these assignments from a "I got this" kind of perspective. They're thrilled to not have to do, analyze a book or an essay or a research article. And they're like, "Oh, well I can analyze this poster, this meme no problem. I've got this." So I kind of like that and I try to leverage that approachability of the assignment, but then I also have to do some work to help them see how to break down the steps of visual analysis.

What they typically like to do is jump to, here's what it all means. And it's like, well, how did we get from the original text to, here's what it all means we have to make transparent those steps in between. I love teaching visual analysis and visual rhetoric at the first-year and in upper-division, but I've learned that students need a lot of support and scaffolding for those in between steps. So to give you an example that kind of connects in with this embodied place-based work I've been doing, and also that comes out of the "Stop Telling Women to Smile" project is a few years after that I began having students go on a street art walking tour with me. We have the advantage of being an urban campus in downtown Atlanta. And so really, again, seeing the walls around us as a text for of the course. Instead of just looking at pictures of murals and textbooks, let's wear some comfortable walking shoes and we're going to go walk today. I tell them in advance and I kind of map out a route.

The first time we did it, I was able to invite a local artist to lead the tour. He actually knew many of the muralists who had done the pieces, again, trying to tap into that kind of public local knowledge. I'm not expert in this, so who can we bring in? So we walk through, there's a few corridors near campus where there's several series of kind of commissioned murals. Then there's almost like, it's the Krog Street Tunnel, if anyone's in the Atlanta area and knows that. It's more of like a free expression space. We kind of do some comparative work around commissioned murals and what some people might call graffiti or what other people might just free art.

So we started doing that work and then I built that into an assignment. So we walked together, and students take their own pictures, and then they choose a mural from our local area, either one

on the tour or one in their kind of neighborhood, and they analyze it. We do that work of, okay, so you've got your mural, and the first assignment I have them pick five or six features of the image to analyze and detail. So instead of what does it all mean, here is a little girl holding a balloon. Talk about the balloon, what is the balloon doing? How does your understanding of the balloon contribute to this larger meaning? So we really try to break down into steps kind of this observations and inferences. What do you observe? What do you see in the image? Literally because they want to jump to the conclusions, right? And so how do those literal things we see help us work together to contribute to your reading of the image?

We do that, work in kind of a deconstructed essay, and then I lead them into a more traditional essay where they're having to do that visual analysis work, but also have thesis statements and bring in some outside research. Then I like to end with a shifting from consumers to producers of visual rhetorics. So they're not just analyzing others' visual choices, but then they do kind of a public visual argument of their own. Sometimes that's like a digital kind of project, sometimes it's not. And so it's a nice kind of arc for class, and it works well in the upper division and in first year composition as well.

SW: This is my last question. You're the director of the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program at Georgia State University. What are some of your administrative priorities? What's your administrative philosophy and are there any initiatives that you're currently working on? Is there any kind of theory or WAC practice that has most informed the work that you do as a director?

AJH: I had the wonderful benefit of inheriting a really well-established long running program. Georgia State's WAC program was founded by George Pullman in the late nineties. Its first director was Mary Hawks and I took it over from Brennan Collins a few years ago. Early in my administrative work for this program has been how can I build on these initiatives without undermining the great work of colleagues? Like don't mess it up, right? So it's been a great learning experience to take what they handed to me, which is really great program. Has really far reach across campus. We've had hundreds of faculty go through the program over the years and learn about writing intensive pedagogies. We have a really robust piece of the program around writing fellows, which we hire graduate students within departments and disciplines across campus. They go through some WAC workshops to learn about good pedagogy, and then they're embedded writing fellows or writing tutors. And we've had, since record keeping was passed down to me, probably nearly a thousand graduate students go through this over the 20 plus years of the program. So it's definitely been a don't mess it up kind of approach.

But my philosophy is developed a lot out of folks I've learned from over the years. And we were talking earlier about North Carolina State University, where I did my bachelor's and masters. I had the great opportunity to work with Chris Anson there and many others. But in particular my first year as a master student, I don't even know if I had designated rhetoric and composition as my area of focus yet, kind of randomly placed with Chris Anson in the campus Writing and Speaking program, learned so much from that experience. I remember sitting around, Chris maybe still does these today, brown bag lunches with faculty from across the university, sitting around and talking about writing. What is "good writing" in your discipline. Right?

To me, WAC at the heart of it, is that. Faculty from across the university coming together and sharing their ideas and talking about student writing. It's what we love to do in our field. And so to have others come in, and my favorite part of my job is when we kind of do that work. So to me, the heart of WAC is really grounded in good faculty development and bringing folks together, acknowledging their expertise that they bring to the table, but also kind of gently encouraging them to think about what we know are best practices in our field for teaching writing. WAC at GSU is also situated within our Teaching and Learning Center, so I have a lot of good support for that kind of faculty development work.

Kind of on the horizon for the program, we are doing some new work around assessments, trying to roll out some larger assessments. The history of the program, I'm actually working on a piece with a graduate student, Jessica McCrary. Georgia State had a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) as part of our accreditation. It was kind of a WAC initiative. It was called Critical Thinking Through Writing, but it shared many of the goals of WAC. So they were separate programs that ran separately. The QEP is kind of not here anymore because we have a new QEP. Those come every 5 or 10 years, I think, but WAC is still here. So we're trying to tease out how to roll out more assessment in the program without burdening faculty too much with that work, how to do it in a good way.

Another big initiative on my agenda is how can we learn from the great work happening at other institutions about how to include more anti-racist WAC practices and approaches? Thinking particularly of Genevieve García de Müeller's work at Syracuse. How can we do that work here at Georgia State and support faculty in doing that work in the writing intensive WAC classes? So those are kind of on my agenda and my to-do list. Since I took over as director of the program, we formed an official committee, advisory committee. We voted on a mission statement for the program. We're getting kind of these pieces in place to roll out some larger initiatives, but it's been a real pleasure. I love administrative work, and so I really enjoyed kind of getting to it more with WAC.

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