Episode 41: Beatrice Mendez Newman
Transcript

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

In this episode I talk with Beatrice Mendez Newman about teaching at one of the largest Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) in the United States, integrating cultural and linguistic histories and identities in the writing classroom, problematizing traditional standards associated with language, and embracing translingual and multimodal practices.

Beatrice Mendez Newman is Professor in rhetoric and composition at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, situated right on the U.S.-Mexico border. Beatrice has written several articles and chapters on translingualism, most recently in the SUNY collection *Bordered Writers: Latinx Identities and Literacy Practices at Hispanic-Serving Institutions* (2019). Her forthcoming article in The English Journal (November 2020) celebrates the way translingual writers develop their voice and share their stories in online writing environments. Additionally, she has completed a study guide for ESL certification in Texas to be available this fall from Research & Education Association (REA). Beatrice's current research looks at how online learning spaces impact expression, voice, and writing agency for translingual writers.

Beatrice, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You teach at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, which is a research university that has multiple campuses in the southern most part of Texas. Student enrollment is around 30,000, and 90% of students are Hispanic. To sort of put that into perspective for those unfamiliar with HSIs, an institution is defined as an "Hispanic-Serving Institution" if enrollment is at least 25% Hispanic students. UT Rio Grande Valley is the second or third largest Hispanic-Serving Institution in the nation. Can you talk about your institutional context and your approach to teaching writing?

BMN: I would say that we focus a lot on the power of literacy. We have a program that is made up of a lot of different lectures, and the rhet/comp specialists tend not to teach regularly in the program, so it's mostly managed by lecturers, even the first-year writing coordinator is a lecturer. We have what I would consider a constructed pedagogy that I'm going to define by inclusion, access, and innovation because of the lecturers. They are not traditional rhet/comp specialists with that huge background that goes all the way back to Aristotle and that that integrates all sorts of...because they're so new and there are not books like what you talk about, they basically have to invent the pedagogy, which I think is a good thing. And so there's a lot of idiosyncrasy but I'm using that in a very positive way. It allows each lecturer to participate from where they're coming from in terms of getting the students to recognize their literacy, and what they can do with it.

The first-year writing coordinator draws heavily on the work of Chip Heath and Dan Heath, their ideas about moments, and he's been using that to drive the way he talks to the lecturers and those of us who participate, when we're able to, in their conversations. He likes the idea of stickiness and gravity, so he uses those terms a lot to try to define what goes on in the classroom. And while some of those things are accidental, he wants us to try to figure out, well, what is it that

happened? What led up to those moments of learning, and moments of connectivity, and moments of empowerment of literacy? So he talks a lot about that. My personal pedagogy is driven by the concept and construct of space. Going all the way back to the idea of third space.

And so, I try to create a situation in the face to face classroom, and now we are moving into online situations, where the students can find their voices. I am deeply influenced, have been deeply influenced by Steven Johnson's *Where Good Ideas Come From*, which is not a rhet/comp book, so that's…my point is that we aren't so much about using a particular rhet/comp book, that what we're trying to get the students to recognize is how they can use their cultural background and their plans for making a difference and finding their voices. We use, maybe you want some specifics about what we do in the class. I start with narrative, but then we also do a lot of narrative that is what I call…not a literacy narrative but like a school memoir. They go back and talk about how it is they are able to learn? What conscious decisions do they make when they are learning?

And we use also a lot of film in my class because it's a great way to analyze a literary text that is not an actual traditional, as they would put it, "dull and boring" book. And so, we have looked at, we have analyzed *Dead Poets Society*, and also *The Ron Clark Story*. You know, how is it you can create change in yourselves in order to create change, holistically, when you go out and do things in the world? We do a lot of revision, also. Everything that they do, whether it's a discussion board or an essay, we use revision a lot. Also, I draw heavily on the ideas of James Paul Gee, and his ideas about discourse and literacy is not just knowing how to read and write, but knowing how to use your abilities in order to make things happen. The agency that you have with literacy.

And also, we don't end the course with a great big writing project. They are now doing a multimodal project, which they really love because it allows them to actually do things that are so much more exciting, and they get to integrate research and their voice, and illustrations, and so on, by picking something that really matters to them. I use this approach both in my research class and in the preliminary first year class. It just makes them have a better first year experience, and because it is required at our institution, and because they have had, as one of them pointed out a few years ago, "We've done this for 12 years, and we're doing it again. We are so tired of English." And so, just looking at it from a different perspective makes them be more participatory in that space that I'm trying to create.

SW: You're talking about emphasizing student agency and valuing students' voices, and experiences, and perspectives. How do you integrate your students' rich cultural, racial, and linguistic histories and identities in your teaching practices? And then, how do you resist traditional standards and norms associated with writing in order to really foster linguistic diversity?

BMN: That is the most salient characteristic that our students come to this university with. I mean, if you were to enter the space of one of our classrooms, what you would notice is that, you know, everybody, just about everybody, is Hispanic. We're not 100% Hispanic, but the reality in the classroom is that almost everybody is. So that's the first thing. People who come from other states that have been in more traditional classrooms, that's one of the things they say, that they

were not expecting to have that kind of a situation. So that's the first thing. And then, the other thing is, most of our students come from our area, the four-county area that is the Rio Grande Valley. And because of the way that second language learning is handled in Texas, many of them have been marked throughout their school careers, in some very pejorative ways.

You know, LEP is a term that's used nationally, and it is in our actual state documents. I mean, LEP sounds like such a negative term: Limited English Proficiency. And they're also ESL students, and EL, or English Learners. And so, they've been marked in this way. They come to the university and they've got that sense of deficiency, because of the way that they are tested. So the first thing that we discover is we have to make sure that they don't feel that way. You know, we give them opportunities to use their language in creative ways, and that it's not a deficiency, that it is nothing but a positive because of the great things that happen in your brain when you have multiple languages. So, the other thing is that, again, because of the fact that the kids come mostly from this area, family is a priority. That is a Hispanic given. Your family is there. It's non-negotiable.

You never say, well, here's what I have to do with my family or for my family, here's what I have to do for school. If there's a clash, it is not a clash, family always supersedes. Because it's a commuter campus, many of the students live with their family still. If anything happens, like I had a mom standing outside my office one day on the first day of class who talked to me, she was the mom of a dual enrollment student, that was really the first time that ever happened. The parents send you emails, stuff like that. So family is really involved. That creates a lot of trauma and a lot of drama as well. The other related things, a lot of the kids have jobs and, again, like family, the jobs like, “Oh, my boss wants me to work extra, I can't come to class,” that kind of stuff.

And really interestingly, a lot of our students have spouses. They are actually married. I had an 18 year-old freshman in a regular class and she had two children, a husband and then also was living with her family. So that kind of integrated sense of family. And then they say, “Well, English is not my best subject.” Or “I'm really, really bad at English.” And I'm like, “No, you're perfect. Everything is fine.” And then there's also the “crossings” ideas. I mean, I've had students who've said, well, I came by myself as a teenager. I left my family in Mexico because I wanted the opportunities in America. I mean, that is amazing. 12 year-olds that decided, or 13 year-olds, they left their family. I mean, the bravery that that reveals is just amazing.

Some of them are not citizens, they've written stories of acquiring citizenship or helping family members acquire citizenship. And then, I think the most harrowing story I've read is a boy who actually wrote about his family, literally what you see on TV, crossing in the dark, and then the issues that he faced when he had to decide, do I tell the school that I am illegal, and lose my scholarship, what do I do? You know, that sort of thing, it's just a given in our classes. And as English professors, we see the students much more closely than like an engineering class or a history class where there's 250 people in the class. So that means they feel really comfortable and safe, safe in a good way, in our classes.

Being bilingual or translingual, whatever word you want to use, multilingual, is a definite positive. It creates hybrid language possibilities that you don't have if you're a monolingual

speaker of English. I do resist the error hunting. I teach a lot of perspective teachers and graduate students, and I tell them that is not the way to approach language learning or literacy. You don't focus on that. Yes, I resist traditional standards in the sense that it exacerbates the deficiency model. And I don't like that. We value our students' backgrounds tremendously.

SW: So Beatrice, I think one thing you're getting at are the assumptions about your institutional context and student population. For example, you mention resisting the deficit model and problematizing notions of "error" in student writing. What are some commonplace misconceptions about teaching at a Hispanic-Serving Institution? And how would you train and develop instructors to teach writing at an HSI?

BMN: Oh my, okay. I discovered this when I started going out and doing conferences, they're like, "Your students all speak Spanish? They write in Spanish?" I want to say that's probably the most common misconception, that they speak Spanish only and cannot speak English, or when they speak it they speak it incompetently. So that's a huge misconception. And that they write in Spanish. I have never...I mean, they integrate words here or there when they're appropriate for the context. Some of the students actually come from Mexico. They have said, well, I write in Spanish and then I translate it. But very, very few. And then the other misconception is that everybody is an ESL student at your institution. Well, you know, they're not. I mean, some kids actually don't speak Spanish, and they talk about that, "Yeah, I'm Hispanic, but I just never really learned it, for whatever reason."

I would start with a background in traditional ESL theory, where you learn great stuff about interlanguages and about, there is no...everybody who is learning a second language is not all in the same spot at that point, and that it is a transition. But I would also depart from that to explain that the concept of translingualism is really innovative because it doesn't see a trajectory, the traditional trajectory from L1 to the target language, L2. Instead, I think translingualism allows for a merging of rhetorics and constructs from the two languages to create a new way of presenting yourself rhetorically and your literacy. So that would be one thing, you know, use the traditional ESL background, the traditional discussions of ESL with, you know, all the big names like [Rosalie] Porter and [Stephen] Krashen.

I would also point out that error is a good thing. A must read in classes like this one I teach is, Bartholomae's "The Study of Error." I mean, I think everybody should read that. Error is a way of showing what you know. Not of showing what you don't know. I also would spend some time on funds of knowledge. Especially if you are dealing with a population of students that so richly depends on their background and culture to understand and shape their perception of the world. The idea also that literacy is multifaceted, as we in Deborah Brandt's idea of the way that literacy is kind of like a commodity that we use, the economies of literacy. The sense that every single student has so many stories to tell.

They, many times, come to our institutions thinking that they don't, to my institution, that they don't have stories to tell, because their teachers have ingrained in them that they have to have experiences like, you know, somebody said going to museums, going to visit places. And I actually had a high school teacher say, my students can't do those prompts on the mandated exams because they've never had any experiences. I was like, what? I mean, they come with

those ideas, so we have to understand that they have so many stories to tell. And then, the way that we shape the spaces that they are in physically or in terms of pedagogically, to feel good about their contributions to the community of learners, and the contributions that they're making toward their own development as users and agents in language.

SW: Earlier you mentioned multimodality and using film as opposed to alphabetic texts as a point or as a way for critical thinking and cultivating analysis in the writing classroom. You also just mentioned embracing a translingual approach to teaching writing. I'm wondering if you could talk more about the intersections and affordances of translingual pedagogies and practices and multimodality?

BMN: I think that multimodality helps them see that they may not be able to write the way they want to, again, not because they can't, but because they have been taught so rigidly to do things in a certain way from elementary through middle school and high school. And so, they're stuck in that way of thinking. If you tell them, okay, well, maybe instead of writing an essay, why don't you post a little video of yourself talking about the character that you associate most with in *Dead Poets Society* or in *The Ron Clark Story*? Or, why don't you find some images that illustrate the way that you have crafted your path through school? And they're like, we can do this! This is so much more fun. And of course, then they are creating stuff.

You know, when you create a PowerPoint, many of them are like, we have never done this before. And then they write back and say now, I've used this in my other class and I felt so competent. And then, of course, I'm also teaching them how to create, turn it into a YouTube video…these ritzy glitzy presentations that just blow them out of the water. I mean…I'm just so impressed with how much stronger they are when they are doing multimodal things more than a dull boring research paper, traditional, analytical essay. I mean, it's the same skills, but they're just presented in a different way.

I don't think that many of them actually use Spanish when they do their presentations, but what does happen is that those kids that are very, very quiet in the class, and this is an unfortunate thing in many of our classes is that, they are very self-conscious. I speak Spanish, but I'm not a very fluent speaker of Spanish, and I would be very reluctant to speak in a public situation, like 30 other people in there. And so, they're very reluctant to speak. And so, in class when they do these presentations, you don't hear that tentativeness. You don't hear that reticence. So they're very, very sure about what they're doing. And I really love that...

I do have to say one thing. I think one of the funniest things that's ever happened in my classes, when we did our first day, let's talk a little bit about ourselves, I had a student who, he stood up, he was a Philippines student, and he said one of the great things that happened when I was in school is I learned how to do beat bop. And I was like, hm. And he got up and he just did this beat bop thing, and we're all sitting there, you know, our mouths open. He was just awesome. I mean, I would say that's definitely multimodality. They weren't writing. They weren't writing, here's me, and me telling my professor. Instead, it's here's me, performing in front of everybody.

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