Episode 111: Bethany Monea, Joselyn Andrade, and Mikaela Pozo
Pedagogue podcast
Transcript

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

In this episode, Bethany Monea, Joselyn Andrade, and Mikaela Pozo talk about reimagining education through arts and activism, addressing linguistic discrimination and valuing linguistic diversity, multimodality, and the LatiNXT GEN project.

Bethany Monea is a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Pennsylvania, where she studies youth writing and media-making practices and cultivates critical approaches to digital literacy using participatory, multimodal methodologies. She has taught first-year writing classes for multilingual students and graduate-level courses on digital literacies, and she has worked with first-generation-to-college high schoolers in college-bridge programs. She is currently completing her dissertation, which is a participatory, ethnographic study of the multimodal and multilingual literacies of first-generation, Latinx students transitioning to college. Her publications can be found in *Computers and Composition, Kairos*, and *Qualitative Research,* as well as several edited collections, and her interactive exploration of interface literacy, "Screen Reading," won the Kairos 2021 best webtext award.

Joselyn Andrade is a second-year college student and first-generation student and immigrant. She is currently attending George Mason University where she is pursuing a double major in Psychology and Criminology, with a concentration in Forensic Psychology. In addition to this, she is passionate about art and education. Her passion for education is seen through her work as a mentor in a college-bridge program for first-generation students like herself.

Mikaela Pozo is a second-year Sociology student at George Mason University. She is a collaborator of the LatiNXT GEN collective, which focuses on highlighting issues of educational inequity as well as the college transition through the lens of first-generation Latinx youth. She is an amateur poet and interested in philosophy and politics. Among the many issues she feels strongly about, she is particularly passionate about economic inequality and its effects on educational equity, voting access, and immigrant rights.

Bethany, Joselyn, and Mikaela, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: So you all co-authored a piece in Perspectives in Urban Education called "Beyond Words: Reimagining Education Through Arts and Activism." Can you talk to me more about this article and what you're encouraging teachers and students to consider as it relates to education and literacy through art and activism?

BM: And I think the article is a good place to begin this conversation because it represents what we've been trying to do as a research collective on a couple of different levels. So Joselyn, and

Mikaela, and I are working alongside another couple… actually I think how many more of us are there…there's six or seven other students all from Latinx families all of whom are going to be the first in their family or are now the first in their family to attend college. And we kind of came together in the context of a college bridge program where I was a writing teacher and a volunteer, and these students were enrolled in order to get support in transitioning to, and through college. I invited these students to join me in a research project in which I wanted to really investigate how students experience the transition from high school to college, particularly as it relates to their literacy practices, as someone who was a first-year writing teacher for many years, and is now a PhD student, like looking at differences in secondary post-secondary literacy instruction.

I was really interested in asking these questions in collaborations with students themselves throughout their actual college transition process. So we came together to do this research work but it was also really important for me for students to be able to tell these stories about their college transition in their own words and through modalities that were meaningful to them and for audiences other than academics, other than other researchers, you know. What we decided to do is to also create a web series, which we're going to probably talk about more as this conversation unfolds, where students were documenting their transition experiences through film and putting those short films online on a YouTube channel.

So back to your original question about the article that we wrote. This opportunity came along as we were working on this web series, and as I was like interviewing them and engaging in this ethnographic research. I was offered an opportunity to contribute to this special issue of the journal *Perspectives in Urban Education*. I thought, "Oh, what a great way to like extend our collaborative research, you know, into a different space." I asked the students I was working with if they wanted to collaborate with me on the article, and then we went through kind of a collaborative writing process with Joselyn and Mikaela and our other co-author, Perla Gonzalez, who wasn't able to be here today. It started with conversations, right? We got together on a Zoom call, and we started talking about like, what do we care about, what are our lived experiences as students, as teachers have to teach us about what matters in an educational context and how we can make education more equitable and more accessible. That led us to a lot of conversations around embracing linguistic diversity in classrooms and really celebrating it and also embracing and celebrating artistic expression and non-alphabetic forms of literacy and multimodal literacy practices.

We really took up that aspect of multimodality and artistic expression. We're lucky enough that Joselyn and Mikaela are all also incredibly talented artists. I have a background in art and design as well. What we tried to do was to infuse our artistic practices into that article and to also infuse storytelling as a legitimate form of academic research and knowledge production. It's really kind of a mosaic of poetry and storytelling and personal narrative and painting and calligraphy as well as more traditional academic writing practices. What we wanted to do with bringing all these things together is show the value of creating space for different types of stories, different types of languages, different types of forms of expression in the process of knowledge production in the

hopes that that would inspire teachers to also incorporate and value and really amplify these diverse ways of knowing and doing and speaking in their classrooms as well.

SW: In this article, you write, "One of the problems we believe it is important to address in the current educational landscape is the issue of linguistic discrimination in schools and in society as a whole, which is connected to the racialization of students and racism within schools." You also reflect on your own stories and experiences in education. Can you talk about the importance of decentering whiteness and standardized English in classrooms and how teachers might curate a space that values linguistic diversity?

MP: When we're talking about like decentering whiteness and also like challenging standardized English in the classroom, really what we're doing is we're trying to move away from needing to constantly legitimize different dialects and also challenge that there is a hierarchy of languages where usually standardized English is on top. I think to do this, and we talk about this, is we need to actively infuse and advocate for language diversity within the curriculum and where we posit the curriculum or where we posit people of color and their dialects, both AAV E and Spanglish as not just important for their stories and content, but are rich with literary analysis. I think by moving away from viewing language as needing to be so prescriptive, we also challenge the different associations of what is intelligent, what is proper, and what is objective. I think inherent to the way that we view standardized English, we see it as something that is objective, right, and who said that? Who said that it needed to be that way?

I think by centering different dialects and viewing language differently, we see it as more fluid. I guess ultimately what I'm saying is that our forms of expression are legitimate. They have their own grammatical rules. And like I said, rich with literary analysis and things that you can learn so much from within the classroom.

JA: Through doing this article together, I think we found that there is no concrete framework. That's the reality. It very much depends on what we are already working with in that already established classroom setting and not just in the classroom, but also what is going on socially outside of the classroom as well. That plays a huge aspect on how we integrate different dialects, different narratives, different forms of art, and how those groups of students and that community will take it. So that is very much important before implementing anything, having a strong understanding of what your community values, and what is made up within your community, as well as what type of environment you, as an educator, want to provide? What do you cultivate?

And then through that, taking the steps, as we said in the article, as well as doing a lot of personal reflection with your students. I realized through my time in going in higher education, you know, past high school that I didn't reflect on identities, that I knew that they were there, but nobody really took the time to really form an environment for me to reflect on it. I didn't realize how important it was to be a Latinx first generation student until they asked me in my college application. And I was like, oh, I think I have an answer. You know, we don't realize how, how important it is to reflect on these aspects of our life and how they intertwine with our education

as well as us as a community socially as well. But I think it's important to do a lot of assessment of the already established community, the classroom setting. And by doing so create a specific plan, which is easier said than done. I do not think that we will find a concrete framework ever because there's so many other aspects that come into play, but in general, as educators, by assessing the environment, and by creating a customizable educational curriculum for your students and picking out what needs more representation, different types of dialects, works of arts…and through that, creating and cultivating a space for your students to explore those different pieces of art, different forms of human expression. I feel like that would be a loose framework to go about.

SW: Bethany, I know your interests are also in digital literacies and multimodality. What do you think are some of the affordances of centering multimodality in classes and how do these different modes and mediums help you as a teacher cultivate learning?

BM: You know, my own teaching history, I began implementing like a multimodal assignment into my first-year composition classroom early on. In my experiences as a teacher, and what I noticed over time was like the more freedom I gave students within that assignment the richer the learning outcomes tended to be right. And so, I started off with like, "Oh, let's all create a video." And like, "Let's all use iMovie to do that." I'll bring in like, you know, an iMovie specialist from the library and we'll go through these tutorials together. But what I began to realize over time is that students were creating all kinds of multimodal and digital texts on their own and through a variety of tools that I didn't know about and didn't have access to or didn't have knowledge of. But they did.

So by giving more freedom and more choice in those types of assignments, then students could choose a tool or choose the medium or choose a platform that they were already familiar with. Then, they could bring that knowledge set into the classroom and just work on refining it, using some of the skills we've been practicing around like rhetorical awareness or organization or coherence or whatever, those kind of foundational compositional skills that we've been practicing might be opening up to more choice…that was one thing that was kind of transformative in the way that I approached multimodal assignments in my own composition classroom, emphasizing risk and creativity as a key component of learning with these technologies. That ties directly into…I know you think a lot about assessment Shane, and so there has to be assessment frameworks in place that encourage risk taking, and that encourage creativity in order for anyone to feel comfortable, like trying to learn a new mode of expression. I think that they have to be safe and secure in knowing that they're not going to be penalized for not knowing how to do that thing, but they're going to be rewarded for trying to learn how to do that thing. Digital literacy and multimodality and different types of forms of artistic and non-alphabetic expression have really been transformative in my practice as a researcher as well.

SW: Mikaela, what do you feel like are some benefits to multi-modality maybe from a research perspective?

MP: When it comes to research…I feel like when we incorporate multimodality, even participants who we research, we're really like expanding access and also centering the groups that we're actually analyzing and that we're trying to make conclusions or say something about. Right? I feel like sometimes when it comes to research, there's always this kind of distance, and there's always like this disconnect between the researchers and then the people who are being researched. I think multimodality, and even participatory research, kind of helps create that gap where it doesn't have to be that way, where key figures in the research analysis and knowledge production and all of that…and it has been transformative in my experience with being a part of this research project, because it has allowed me to not only have a lot of agency, but also enter in spaces that usually I wouldn't be able to enter, like writing a research article and having that published, also legitimizing the fact that my story and how I analyze my story, and how I analyze our group stories is…legitimate research.

And then also, presenting those findings at academic conferences, which you don't really see that many undergraduate researchers at. Also just people of color. I think there is more benefit and more richness in having and incorporating the communities that we are hoping to help or support or learn from. We come with like more richer conclusions about things because it's coming from the people. That's kind of the way that I see it. In this project specifically, like we're not trying to make overarching generalizations about anything really. We can't. That would be probably unethical. But we're trying to kind of show certain patterns that we see and that we notice through our own experiences, but also in conversations with each other. That's what we're like pointing out. We're saying, "Hey, like we see this pattern and the process of like conversing and discussing and seeing those, I guess, similarities in our conversations. That is the process. It's something that we actively try to cultivate." And I think that is important.

BM: One thing I would just say is that, you know, I'm also a graduate student. I'm finishing my PhD. I'm still learning what research is and can be. Right? And something I'm always careful to think about and to put forward is that like, even though I do participatory research, I don't think that that's the only way to be an ethical researcher, right. Like I think that there are ways that ethnography, that large scale statistical analyses can also be ethical and are important. I never want to say that like, this is it, this is how all research should be, or all research should look, or this is the only way to do research ethically. But I think that for the context of the questions that we were asking together and the lived experiences that we did and did not share, you know, that working together to do collective theorizing, to create knowledge through art, through media, through video, through conversation, through storytelling, was what worked for us, something that we're hoping to show and to model.

SW: Joselyn, let's talk about the LatiNXT GEN project and web series. What were the motivations behind this project and what are its goals and aims?

JA: So you can find us on YouTube. We are LatiNXT GEN. It is spelled L-A-T-I-N-X-T space G-E-N. Essentially it consists of videos, small narratives or large, regarding our transition from high school to college. It views different aspects of that transition in a collective light or just an individual one. When we originally got together, I remember asking like, what do you guys want

out of this? Like, what information do you want through our videos to shine through, to what audiences, how will this benefit you as the person who's creating it? Through our time together, you know, researching, creating videos, presenting at various conferences and universities, we always come with the same main points that we want to do this for educators, and give them an inside look from the student's perspective of the transition from high school to college, because there's so many things that could create gaps unknowingly between the teachers and students, whether it be the class sizes, not allowing certain ways of expression to be like cultivated in a classroom or even allowed, you know. I've had teachers who, like if I wanted to say something, I mean up here in the DNB, like we talk a lot of slang and if I said something, they'll look at me and they're like, are you sure that's how you want to express it?

I'm like, I think so. I can't think of any other way. I remember telling this to Bethany, like, if teachers want to know what's happening in our brains as students, what's going through our head through this transition, they should be able to get down on our level. Not even down, maybe up. I don't know, get on our level in general. Just look at how we see the world, you know, take the time to actually learn what we mean, what we say, why we express ourselves the way we do. And maybe perhaps the knowledge production that occurs in a classroom setting will be richer in content, you know, and not just in content, but also when you leave the classroom, what the student takes with them, as well as what the teacher takes with them. So that was the main thing when we first started.

But we also realized, well, we want this to be a safe haven for students who have similar identities to us, similar experiences, let them know that college isn't just a one-way street. There's a lot of things that happen in life. You know, we're human, there's some things that we can't really calculate. And that's what college is. It's our transition to adulthood. And there's a lot of aspects in our life that we don't really take into consideration. You know, when we are 16 deciding like what colleges do I want to apply to, or 17, you know a lot happens. We wanted our videos to show that to students, as well as be a way to connect. Another reason that we later…I found that a lot of us found this to be something cathartic, just putting our stories out there, sitting down and taking time to create a video, expressing what we had gone through and essentially giving ourselves that space to be like, "Hmm, this year was kind of hectic. Maybe we should reflect on it. Maybe there's some nuggets of knowledge in here, you know, process what we've gone through."

So we also found it as something that's important for ourselves. But one thing is for sure is that we chose a platform that we did because we wanted this to be accessible to whoever wanted it, to who wanted it. We wanted anyone to take a look at our videos and if they resonated, gorgeous subscribe, you know. But if not, well, these are our narratives, and that's another thing. We also chose YouTube because it allowed for us to say our stories, whether it be collective or individually, to have that platform. We have stories in our YouTube that I feel like stand way stronger alone. They have so much power alone. And there are stories that we have that have so much power and there's togetherness in our group, you know? But we really wanted for whoever decided to share their story, whoever decided to publish a video, they had the power on how that

story was told. They had a right to their own story, their own experiences. None of us have to be the ones who validate it. It's already valid on its own.

SW: Thanks, Bethany, Joselyn, and Mikaela. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.