

Episode 9: Beverly J. Moss

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Beverly J. Moss, an associate professor of English at The Ohio State University where she specializes in composition and literacy studies. Her scholarly interests include examining literacy in African American community spaces, composition theory, and pedagogy and writing center theory and practice. Moss has served on the editorial boards of the *College Composition and Communication* journal and the *Studies in Writing and Rhetoric* book series.

One thing I admire about Beverly's teaching and research is how she moves beyond the university, how she inquires and investigates writing practices through ethnographies, and how she opens up the classroom by focusing on community literacies, how she listens and records what's happening within specific communities. She asks important questions, like what writing practices are going on, what's really happening outside our institutional spaces, and what's being valued in our local communities? This helps teachers and students see learning in really dynamic, complex ways because it changes the way we think about reading and writing.

In this episode, we talk about her research in African American churches and communities, how she embraces community literacies in teaching, and what it means to teach writing as an African American woman in a predominantly white space.

Beverly, thank you so much for joining us.

SW: Let's start with your work on community literacy, specifically your interest and research in African American churches and African American women's clubs. You value literacy studies and civic activism. You value community engagement and community writing. Do you mind sharing what got you interested in this work and studying African American community literacies?

*BM: It's an interesting moment, and this takes me back to when I was in graduate school. My dissertation director, Marcia Farr, is a sociolinguist by training, and so it was interesting to be introduced to composition and literacy studies and rhetoric through thinking about sociolinguistics in one way. But we read *Ways With Words*, Shirley Brice Heath.*

And what was interesting to me about *Ways With Words* was not only the introduction to ethnography, because we were getting that in the course, we were getting introduced to the ethnography of literacy, but also that the site for *Ways With Words* actually was the area that my family grew up and still lives in and that I was born in. I kept thinking, "Oh, my goodness, this is sort of about me." And so there was a personal connection for me to that work, being from the Piedmont Carolinas, and having that as the site of her work and recognizing moments in that book when she's talking about what happens in those Black church services, and I thought, "I've been in those services. I grew up in those settings."

And it was that moment where I felt like I connected to the field in a different way, that I could do this kind of work. And I had gone to graduate school, particularly in composition and rhetoric, because I was interested in the kind of writing and literacies that people do outside of school that have an impact on what happens in the classroom. And here was the study that almost gave me permission to do that, that said, "Oh, yeah, this is actually a way for you to connect."

It gave me a methodology, it gave me ... And I think about ethnography as a way of thinking as well. It gave me a way to think about the work I was interested in, and it was also encouragement to really think about and to explore the different literacy. The literacy, not only possibilities, but sort of the literacy practices, the rich literacy practices in the communities that I grew up in, which sort of took me back to the church because I thought that the Black church was ... I mean, the way that Heath presented information opened up all these possibilities, but I thought there were even richer possibilities, there was more to do, more to see.

So that's what got me interested in community literacy, but I also was interested in ... I tell people I have an agenda. I don't hide that. My agenda is to document the rich literacy practices that occur in African American community spaces.

SW: You were thinking about and doing this work in the '80s when composition studies was still forming its identity. A lot of conversations were going on about writing pedagogy, pedagogies on cognitivism, social constructionist theories, and so on. This is fascinating, too, because ethnographies as a methodology were probably much more situated under anthropology than writing studies. I'm curious as to how this influenced you and mainly how this affected the questions you had. Was there a question you wanted answered about the African American church?

BM: I don't know that it's a deep question, but I think the question for me has always been, so what's going on here? What's happening? Let's go and look. I mean, and it seems like a simple question, but it's a question of invitation...to think about that. So let's think about what's going on here. Let's go see rather than making pronouncements about what people can do and not do.

And it also, for me, sets up community spaces as really...legitimate is probably not the right word right now, but it sets up community spaces as spaces that are equally as important to study as classroom spaces. Maybe that's it. And so what do people value in their community spaces? And how can we have a conversation between what people value in the community spaces and what is valued in academic spaces? Like writing classrooms for example.

And it was interesting because I think when I started graduate school, which was in the '80s, I came to Ohio State in the fall of 1988, when I started graduate school, ethnography wasn't a big thing in composition and rhetoric, but people had started to dabble in it and started to say, "Oh, this might be useful for getting to answer some of those questions about the what's going on here and what's going on there." So we were beginning, though, to move outside of the classroom because I think there was beginning to be a recognition that we need to know what literacy practices, what writing practices people are engaged in when they walk into a classroom.

SW: So our conversation keeps moving inside and outside the classroom, and I'm really curious as to how you see community literacies as important and perhaps actually even necessary to our understanding of teaching and writing.

BM: I was thinking about that, and I mean ... There's the impact that the research can have on what we do in classrooms, but I also have been thinking about what it means to engage students in ethnographic work. I mean, I have done ... Classrooms don't necessarily set up well to introduce students to doing an ethnography, but to use some of the methods and to think about it as a way of framing how we come to understand what's going on.

So I've engaged students that allow them and that encourage them to think about themselves not only as students but as researchers, as people who are pursuing a line of inquiry. And that allows them to think about and to push against what the role of expert is so that they form a question that takes them out of the classroom, that expands the classroom. I shouldn't say "take out" but expands the classroom, beyond university walls to really start to see the complexity of literacy, the complexity of writing that when we talk about writing is not just what we do in those four walls in the classroom. It's not just what we do on a computer. And we do it for different reasons. Let's look at the different reasons that people in these different community spaces write and how they use write.

So I think ethnography allows you to do that. And I'll introduce the students to a different way of thinking about how knowledge is constructed, who constructs knowledge, who produces knowledge, what counts as knowledge. So I think for me that's another way to think about ethnography. It's not just reading people's ethnographies, which I think is important, but it's also being in the middle of being an ethnographer.

SW: How do you build community partnerships? And what does that look like for your writing classes to engage with local communities and develop literacy narratives?

BM: Well, I think they're sort of different models. And it's sort of interesting, this last year I sort of engaged in those different models. I'm teaching a second year writing course. In the second year writing course Literacy Narratives of Black Columbus, this is a course actually that Cynthia Selfe and Lewis Ulman designed. They're both retired, and so I kind of inherited the course and train graduate students to teach that course.

But that course, I won't call it an ethnographic course per se, but it relies on students interviewing people in Black communities in Columbus and gathering literacy narratives. So they are going out and engaging in that process. But I have them do background reading, sometimes I have guest speakers come in. But they are out their collecting data and getting a sense of what's happening, the history of what's happened in those communities but also what's happening now in terms of people's literacy stories.

So there's that kind of project that gets people out of the traditional classroom. I have had students actually do observations, like participant observation. That takes a little bit longer to set up and to execute, so I've had undergraduate students do that.

The other thing I do, and I teach a class from time to time on ... Rhetoric and Community Service is the name. But what happens is that's the class where my students are assigned to write for and with a community partner, generally nonprofits. And so it's not necessarily ethnography per se in all of them, but it is community engaged writing.

I think those courses get labeled service learning. I am hesitant to call all of them service learning. I think the one where the students are assigned to do writing at nonprofits is more of a service learning course. The Literacy Narratives of Black Columbus seems to me to be more of a community engaged course. All of them are community engaged, but I don't necessarily think of that one as a service learning course per se. But all of them place students in the position of understanding the role of writing in those particular settings.

So the ones where they're writing for the nonprofits, the community organizations, some of them are sites I've had relationships with or a colleague has had relationships with, and some of them are new sites, but I set those up. Right? And then we talk about how students would fit, and then I'm the one who makes the contact with the organizations. And there are a couple of those organizations that we've had long-term relationships with.

But there are problems. So this semester the course isn't being taught. One of my colleagues was supposed to teach it but got pulled out to do a different administrative assignment, and so the course isn't taught. And so the people who were counting on having those students don't have them. Right? And so there's that problem.

The other one, the Literacy Narratives of Black Columbus, students, they work in teams, they work in groups. So they tend to make the contacts with sometimes a little assistance from me or someone else, sometimes a lot of assistance. But it's their responsibility to make the contacts because they are making decisions about ... Especially this semester in my class, I came up with a general topic. There were like four. Well, three topics now. So one of the groups is going to be collecting literacy narratives from members of a Black church community. Well, they make a decision about what that means. Do they want to go into one church or do they want to go into multiple churches? And if they're going into multiple churches, are they looking to interview members of the congregation, are they looking to interview the ministers, are they looking to interview people in leadership positions? They're making those kinds of decisions.

SW: Thanks, Beverly. This is my last question, and I'm sort of asking you a question that you have asked in a piece of your writing. I want to frame this question around your institutional context and demographics. You teach at The Ohio State University, which is about 70% white and about 4-6% Black or African American. In "Claiming Our Place on the Flo(or): Black Women and Collaborative Literacy Narratives" with Valerie Kinloch and Elaine Richardson, you asked this question: "What does it mean historically, socially, politically for us to occupy sites of discontent, engage in segregated Black spaces and enter into predominantly white locations that have largely excluded the cultural practices of African and African American people?" I was hoping we could end with that question and you sharing and reflecting on what it means to teach writing as an African American woman in a predominantly white space.

BM: Yeah. When I saw that question, I thought, "Oh, wow, that's somebody turning your question back on you." And I'm still thinking about that, and so I don't know that I have a definitive answer. I think it's a process. Even though this is my 32nd year there, I'm still in the process, and I negotiate that space every day. Right? I negotiate that space when I'm planning classes. I negotiate that space when I walk into a classroom. I negotiate that space when I walk into a committee meeting, if I'm on a university committee or in a department. So it's always in process.

When I walk ... I mean, let me just back up and say, when I am thinking about the course, depending on what course it is, especially if it's an undergraduate course, they don't know who's walking in the door. Graduate students know who's walking in the door, right? But undergraduates don't know who's walking in the door. And for me, that's always a moment of tension, right? Trying to think about, "Well, how much do I include in this course if it's" ...

Like I'm teaching a course right now, which is the Issues and, excuse me, Issues and Methods in Tutoring Writing. It's an undergraduate course that I train students to work in the Writing Center. Every time I teach that course, and I teach it often, I think about how much reading I want to assign that deals with the relationship between writing and race, and language and race. And some of that is about how open I am at that moment to engage in conversations when students may say, "Well, I don't understand why this is important. Writing is writing. English is English." Do I have the stamina to engage in that conversation in the way that I think it needs to be engaged? And sometimes it's no. Sometimes it's like, "Okay, this is feeling like a very white space." Right? But there's also, for me, this ethical responsibility to just, okay, push for it.

So this semester we just finished reading Laura Greenfield's essay on Standard English's Fairy Tale. And it was a really interesting discussion. But there's that discussion, just the back and forth about, "Well, we all need a standard. Right? We have to have a standard so that everybody can communicate." And I thought, "Oh, right, we missed the point."

But then I get to my office and then there's an email from one of ... And we had that discussion, there was one Black student in the class who sent the email, and it was such a wonderful email. She talks in class, but she doesn't say much. The fact that she felt comfortable enough sending me an email that was a very reaffirming email about the reading and the discussion was like, "Right, this is why you do this." Right? "This is why you do this." I'm not just doing it for the larger group of people in my class, which is predominantly white, but I'm also doing it for the one student in that class who may need that affirmation or the reaffirmation.

And so I have to think about that, but there's always a negotiation about how I move and operate in this space, what readings I assign, what my purpose is in assigning those readings. And, because I can't control what the conversation would be like, preparing myself or whatever the conversation is going to be.

SW: So I have to ask a follow-up. How do you prepare yourself for whatever conversation may come up? And you were talking a lot about negotiating your identity. What does that look like, and how tiring is it to constantly negotiate who you are? I mean, we're talking about negotiating for 32 years in different layers of the same place. The program, the department, the university,

the classroom. Is there anything that you've learned through those negotiations, even if they have been exhausting?

BM: Yeah. Well, I'm sure I approach them differently depending on what the class is and depending on what kind of class it is. And there's some moments that I can't prepare for, but I always know that my best starting point is I'm very comfortable in my own skin. Right? I am very comfortable being a Black woman in this space, and at some point I know that, yes, it's the process of I'm negotiating that space, but I'm going to be here, and the students, they're going to be moving on, right, at some point. And so having that comfort level is really important.

But also, I have learned that there are moments where I have to stop, take a step back and say, "Okay, what just happened?" I have to do it quickly sometimes, and I have to make decisions about whether something is a hostile act or not, or whether students are grappling with something and they're struggling with this issue, they're grappling. And that grappling is a learning space, right? It's a learning moment, and I need to treat it like a learning moment. And then there are other times where I have to think, "Okay, what just happened here was not a learning moment," that that was a hostile act.

And so I think this whole idea of negotiating those spaces is important, but also holding the university accountable and having conversations with students about what it means to be in a university that's a land grant university that has, what did you say, four to 6% African American population. For me, that a university is engaging in a hostile act as an institution. And having students have that discussion. And we have had that discussion in some of my classes.

One section of the Literacy Narratives of Black Columbus, students were leading the conversations. The groups have to lead class one day. And we started talking about the population of the university, and they seemed shocked by the numbers. The numbers that you quoted, they seemed really shocked by that. They start looking numbers up on their ... They pulled out their cell phones and started looking the numbers up and really started to think about, "Well, what does it mean?" So that was a wonderful moment. Right?

But then there are other moments, like in that very same class, the students were very reluctant to talk about race, and I know that part of that is because I'm the person standing in front of the classroom. And so one day when I was out of town, I'd gone to a conference, and the graduate student who was working with me in that class was there, and they had the class leading class discussion. Students were reporting, and they'd videotape the class for me. And they had the most amazing conversation about race.

But it happened while I was gone. And I...you know is there evidence that it happened because I was gone? Well, there's not enough evidence. But I think there was a certain comfort level for them in having that conversation without worrying, especially for some of the white students, without worrying about what I would say to them.

I mean, and it can be exhausting, so I won't say that it's not. It can be exhausting, but that means that I have to have those spaces that I can go to. I have to have some kind of support network for me outside the university for the most part, but also some network within the university for

support. I have been very fortunate to be able to have ... I mean, this happened yesterday, to be able to have other Black women in the university that ... and I know are going through that same process.

So yesterday I just ran out. I had 20 minutes to go get lunch before I had to get to my next meeting and ran into another Black faculty member, Black woman from another department. And we had not seen each other than a long time, and it was just so ... it was a moment of joy just to see each other, to be standing in line and be able to talk for a couple of minutes to have her introduce me to another Black woman, someone I had not met. And so you have those moments of joy and those moments of connection.

But also having people from different races and ethnicities, I think is important. And so having colleagues in my own department who are supportive in other ways. And so I think that that's part of it. But yeah, having spaces that I have that are outside university that are spaces where I know I don't have to explain certain things.

SW: Thank you so much for opening up and sharing.

BM: Well, thank you. And thank you for making it easy to talk to you.