

Episode 143: Brandy Lyn Brown

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Brandy Lyn Brown talks about teaching at a professional military university, her administrative philosophy, directing a leadership communication skills center, and feminist pedagogies and practices.

Brandy Lyn Brown currently serves as the director of the Leadership Communication Skills Center at Marine Corps University. She began her career in writing center administration at NC State University in 2010 and has directed centers at Bemidji State University and the University of North Carolina, Pembroke. Her dissertation explores hospitality and writing studies. Her current interests, which are informed by her new context, include exploring gender and conflict studies and writing support, and specialized institutions.

Brandy Lyn, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Can you talk about the Marine Corps University, your administrative position, and also some of the surprises, joys, challenges of professional military education?

BLB: Okay, so before I get started, I do have to say, as a government employee, I have to read a disclaimer that the views that I talk about today are mine and do not reflect policy or position of the Department of Defense or the federal government. Marine Corps University is a professional military education institution. So often we call that PME, and it consists of six resident and non-resident schoolhouses. The Leadership Communications Skills Center is charged specifically to serve three in resident schoolhouses, the Command and Staff College, the School of Advanced Warfighting, and the Marine Corps War College. Those in-resident programs are accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and provide master's degrees. So we do graduate-level education and provide writing and speaking support to them. The students that we serve, our officers, and their mid-career professionals. So as I mentioned, it's graduate-level education, but it's also part of their career progression, and the different schoolhouses serve them at different points in their career.

So for example, the Command and Staff College is the one with typically the largest student body, around 200 students who are typically majors, who will... If they continue on in their career, eventually be promoted to lieutenant colonels. So, what I have found in moving into this, and maybe this is a little bit of a surprise or the switch from moving from traditional institutions to a professional military institution, is the schooling that they're doing for their 10-month program is their job for that 10 months. So they're very committed and very focused, and they are amazingly appreciative of the support that our staff can provide them. So administratively, the Leadership Communication Skill Center, LCSC, is what we call it. Briefly, one of the challenges of moving to professional military education has been learning the language, which is full of acronyms. So, as you can probably tell, but we function primarily like a writing center.

So those are my administrative duties, very much fall into that same creating the schedule, managing. We are a little bit more asynchronous than I think typical centers are to serve the needs of our students. So managing all of that, they're very appreciative of the support that we are able to provide them because they often are coming back to school and maybe have, it's been 10 years or so since they did their undergraduate environment or are undergraduate education and have done any academic writing. And over the course of these 10 months, they'll write several different papers, and they'll work on a master's-level final research project. So the support, they're very grateful of the support because they know their skills are, they've got to get back into the rhythm of doing that kind of academic work.

SW: Brandy Lyn, how would you describe your administrative philosophy and your values as the director of the Leadership Communication Skills Center?

BLB: I'm actually going to step backwards a little bit because I'm still figuring out this space here. In a way, I've been in this position now for, I'm going into my fourth year. I started in January of 2020, and we've maybe been tackling challenges. So, I developed my administrative philosophy working primarily at traditional institutions with traditional writing centers that with peer-to-peer working environments, and then as a director, being a leader of students. So that's very much about almost many times I would be working with students who this was their first job. So teaching them how to adult a little bit, how to do those things. That's where I developed really my administrative philosophy. So, I'm in the process of having to change that and having to rethink that because now I am leading a staff of professionals. These are other government employees. My responsibilities in terms of supervising are different. So, all of that has changed, but my administrative philosophy is rooted. I consider it pragmatic hospitality.

So, I view the interaction between the student and the consultant. I want to be as hospitable as possible, and that, to me, makes my role as an administrator responsible for creating the environment in which they can have the best encounter that they can. And that's really what my dissertation was about describing. So it's all rooted in that, and so, as I said, I'm learning what that means here in this new environment because part of how I shaped this is that at traditional institutions, I was often coming in as a director. For example, at NC State University, I was the first person to give full-time attention to their writing, the writing aspect of their tutorial center, or at Bemidji State University, I was the first person to give dedicated attention to their center in probably about five years, if I remember correctly. There was an established center at UNC Pembroke, but they were also very much come in and make this your own, right?

The Leadership Communication Skills Center here has been operating for about 15 years approximately, and the faculty who work with me now, one of them has been here that whole time. The other came just two years afterwards, so they've got experience over mine. So I've had to think about what that means for us and what that means for, "Well, is this really my space? Am I hosting this space in the way that I typically approach, or am I adapting?"

SW: I'm curious as to the kinds of needs students have coming into the Leadership Communication Skill Center. Has there been a common thread, and how does the center address or meet those needs?

BLB: The interesting thing about our students and our student needs are that they really run the entire spectrum of writing needs. So just like we see in a typical writing classroom or writing center, the students who have some facility and some ease with writing, still getting them into the center, getting them to understand. We can still help and provide good feedback as an audience or as a reader, right? Two students who, like I said, haven't been doing this for 10 or 12 years and need a little bit of a quick refresher. So we adopt that writing center principle and writing instruction principle of meeting students where they are. So we have the entire spectrum of offerings. So the student who just wants us to act as a reader and make an appointment and attach a thing and will read it and put comments in the margins, and send it back to them. And that is the primary way we work with most of the students. Students who need a little bit of a refresher, we do a diagnostic. We don't run it. The Command and Staff College runs a diagnostic essay with their students every year.

We read all of those, and we recommend folks for what we call a studio program, which is five weeks, just a refresher about what is academic writing, what does it mean to put together a thesis, how do you build a paragraph that really supports your thesis. And typically, those students, they just needed that quick, like, "Okay, I'm back in this environment, refresher for them." So, we offer everything along the way. The other maybe I think really interesting thing, or was interesting to me I didn't think about is, we have a significant population of international students because we get international military officers from our partner nations, and it's fascinating. So we run an introduction to academic writing program for them, an intensive program the week before classes start, and we provide them different levels of support all throughout the year.

SW: Brandy Lyn, you've talked about previous experiences in more traditional institutional contexts compared to your current professional military educational context. What advice would you give someone who might be interested in pursuing this specialized military education institution, or what might have helped to prepare you in graduate school to better understand this space in higher ed?

BLB: I think that is a fabulous question. In terms of my own graduate education, I'm sorry. I did my master's and my PhD at the UNC Greensboro, so University of North Carolina Greensboro. And I chose to go there because, when I was researching master's programs, they were one of the few places that I could get a master's in composition and get teaching experience because they had a program with the local community college, Guilford Technical Community College. And I thought at that point in time, I thought I was going to be a community college teacher. And I believe that experience is what has best prepared me for this environment because working in a community college really forces you to think about adult pedagogy and adult learning because you generally have a wide variety of students.

So the level, what we ask of students in terms of graduate-level education versus community college-level education maybe is slightly different. But the adult learners, in both of those situations, there are commonalities and what they are concerned about, what they are looking for in terms of skill building, and how they plan to or maybe don't see a plan for using writing in the future. I think that's the similarity in my personal experience. The other thing is, I wouldn't trade my experience. I loved my experience at UNCG when I was there, but when I was there, we also didn't have much of a technical writing focus. Now, if that had really been what I was looking to

do, I could have cobbled together something. I could have made that my focus. But it's the one thing throughout my experience that I feel like I would've had more confidence about some of what I've been asked to do at different writing centers with writing across the curriculum or moving into this more professional. This is a fairly technical writing sort of focus, right? So having even just one required course that would've maybe introduced me to technical and professional writing as a field, I would've liked that within my graduate education.

SW: Your teaching embraces feminist frameworks and practices. Can you talk more about your approach to teaching writing through feminist pedagogies? How do you center these values in the writing classroom?

BLB: Here, at Marine Corps University, my position is primarily administrative. I have a very typical... I have a position, I am a government employee. I have a position description that defines how my time should be allocated, but I have a very traditional academic curriculum, and development is 40% of what I do. Research and publication is supposed to be about 35% of what I do. And supervisory stuff is supposed to be about 25. So fairly typical, and university service is included with research and publishing within that. So I don't specifically don't teach writing. We, typical, typically think about a composition course, whether it's advanced comp or things like that. I do once a year, the students have what's called elective time in January. It's like a J-term at a typical institution, but they get to choose which courses they take. I offered a course during that time called Rhetorical Power, how language frames are allies, enemies, and communities. So it's not, and actually sometimes I have to promote, this is not a writing class.

This is more rhetoric, this is more language. How does language operate in the world? Yes, you're going to show me that in writing and discussion, but it's not typically a writing class. The feminist aspect, or my sort of feminist framework and influence in terms of thinking of that class, and this does struggle down to when I was teaching first year writing or thinking about that is the core of my teaching philosophy is really that writing is thinking. And I think we heard Amy Morrison say it at Seas, the E.M. Forster quote, "How do I know what I think until I see what I've written?" That's core of my teaching philosophy. So for me, the feminist part of this is encouraging students at any level to think systemically and to think intersectionally, and I ask them to do that.

Like I said, at every level, I think you can tell even from the title of my class that I can't necessarily, I don't know about... And when I approach that class, I approach it. I think the other feminist aspect is that I approach that class as a co-learning opportunity because I am very upfront with the students. I'm brand new to this environment. I can barely keep track of how to tell ranks by what's on people's collars. I've had to do a lot of learning. So, I present them with what I know about language, what I know about rhetoric. And then the co-learning is the what does this mean for you and your profession? What does this mean for how you think about and talk about either partner nations or adversary nations, or how are you building communities within your service because there's such a rich discussion happening around women peace and security issues and other diversity, equity, and inclusion issues within the military world that I think, I guess I could say, I found a little surprising when I got here? I didn't necessarily expect it, but it is a rich discussion. So I ask them to bring their experience, and to me, that's a very feminist practice and framework for co-learning in the classroom.

SW: Thanks, Brandy Lyn, and thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.