

Episode 19: Candace Epps-Robertson

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Candace Epps-Robertson about social justice, race and community literacies, the importance of listening and negotiation in teaching, strategies for facing resistance in the running classroom and her new research on public pedagogies and BTS, a South Korean boy band.

Dr. Candace Epps-Robertson is Assistant Professor of English in the department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She earned her PhD in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric from Syracuse University. Her research examines the ways in which rhetorical educations prepare marginalized groups for participation in the public sphere. Her first book, *Resisting Brown: Race, Literacy, and Citizenship in the Heart of Virginia*, received the 2019 Conference on Community Writing a book award. She is currently working on two new projects. The first examines the implications of the relationship between BTS and ARMY as a model of critical pedagogy for global citizenship. And her second project examines the connections between affect BTS content, social justice and resistance.

Candace, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Let's start with a broad question before moving into your newer research on BTS and ARMY, do you mind talking about your teaching, what you value and what inspires you to teach?

CER: I have actually been in a classroom in some capacity for almost 20 years, for 19 years I think to be exact. I started teaching, the very first teaching opportunity I ever had was as a volunteer English as a second language instructor. From there I moved into working at a community college and teaching first year writing. And then of course at four-year universities, both before grad school, during grad school, and certainly after. But one of the things that I think has really stayed with me from my very first day is that I always have to remember as I walk into the classroom with a syllabus, a set of outcomes, assignments, learning assessments, all of the things that I want my students to do and I hope that we accomplish, I always have to remember or remind myself that my students do the same thing when they come into the classroom.

They bring their own desires. In the beginning, in those ESL classrooms, the desire was often to be able to speak enough English to get a job or fill out paperwork for an apartment. And so the sort of carefully scaffolded assignments that I had created about sentence structure or conversation, I had to learn like, "Okay, it's okay Candace, to throw those out the window because today your students have brought applications in and this is what they want to work on."

And then in the university it's often a lot of competing desires. Some students are in your class because they need to check all gen ed requirements. Some are there because they have to be and they maybe are curious about wanting to figure out what college writing is about. Others are there because they are asking questions, at least if they're taking my classes, they're asking

questions about connections between literacy, social justice and race. And sometimes I've found that students are seeking a writing class or a comp class because they want a place where they can actually have some space to interact with their own ideas.

They've sort of heard through the grapevine, these are smaller classes and that teachers want to read their ideas and have them think critically and that they have some freedom with regards to what that actually looks like. So I have to respect all of those desires. They might not always be the same as my objectives, but one thing I try to make clear is that while, yes, I do believe that I have knowledge to share with them, I also think this is a space where I'm fortunate enough to be able to learn from them as well. And so we need to enter into the classroom as a space, and a place for negotiation. I spend a lot of time talking and listening to my students, especially in those first few weeks.

*SW: You talk about the importance of meeting students' desires, and creating a space for negotiation in the classroom. You study race, social justice, and community literacies. I'm thinking about your book *Resisting Brown*, which examines how African American community members in Virginia responded after *Brown vs Board of Education*. You write about the Prince Edward County Free School. Can you talk about social justice-based work and the importance of listening while incorporating and amplifying marginalized community voices?*

CER: Really to be able to understand how social justice operates, you have to listen to the communities who are experiencing, who are fighting, who are working in these areas. And that's become even more true for me as my research moves away from traditional archives to thinking about digital practices of citizenship and engagement in social justice and online spaces. And my students certainly know what that looks like. I think I've learned a great deal from them, just listening to their experiences both as participants and also as observers in some of these movements as well. By no way do I think, I'm not a digital native. I certainly grew up in, once I was in high school, had a computer in my home and things like that. But the fact that many of our students, I mean, they've been with Instagram, for example, from the very beginning or they know how to navigate Twitter in ways that I just don't.

And so really to be able to learn from them I think is something that I'm indebted to and I really value. Listening plays a large role in terms of how I interact and even think about studying social justice, but also how I'm learning from my students. I think also in terms of thinking about my own research, listening is always where I begin. I can't think of another way really to start any of the work, especially a project that involves race, marginalized communities or literacy because these are areas I think, Shane, that are so personal and so charged that it is my duty as a researcher to start with listening. So my first project where I looked at the Prince Edward County Free School Association as a counter response to white supremacist ideologies really began long before I even went to graduate school because my grandmother was from Prince Edward County.

I grew up with these stories about what happened when the schools closed and how the Black community persevere through and in spite of massive resistance. And when I got to graduate school, I knew. I had identified this project, I knew that it would keep me connected to that community that actually helped me to get to grad school in the first place and I knew there was an archive, but I also knew that there were going to be stories that just weren't represented in that

archive. So it was important that I found a way to have that community be able to speak and share their own stories. And in many instances it just involved me doing a lot less talking and just a lot of listening.

SW: What helps inform your approach to community-based work, especially when it comes to writing with and about specific communities?

CER: I think one of the lessons that I recognized from the very beginning was that I wanted to make sure I wasn't coming across as someone who was explaining for or to the people who had actually lived through the school closures. I kept thinking about who my audiences were and what kinds of needs they had. Similar to what I described about that site of negotiation with students coming into class from me having my own objectives for the course. I knew that there was the academic audience who wanted to hear how I was speaking to the field, how I was positioning myself as a scholar. But then I also knew that there was my home community and they wanted less of the sort of academic posturing and how this matters to rhetoric and composition and more of just here's an opportunity for us to tell our story, a story that so many people still don't know about. But this is what happens and this is why it matters.

There's an action that happens when you yourself stop speaking so that you can allow yourself an opportunity to really listen. What has helped me in the past and continues to inform my approach is that when I would talk to participants, and I'm doing this now with the new project I'm working on. I would say, "Here's how I'm understanding this particular moment or this experience or this document from the archive. What do you think?"

And people would be really quick, especially with the Free School project to say, "No, that's not at all how I felt," or, "I didn't experience it in this way," or, "That paper is just wrong." And in those moments, it would really allow me, I guess, to pause and to also ask myself, "Well, what led you, Candace, to that conclusion? What lenses are you bringing that make you feel like the story was X when this person is telling you y?"

SW: In Resisting Brown, you write, "My grandmother, like scholars of rhetoric and literacy studies, knew that stories were not just talk. For her stories were a tapestry of lessons and histories and often a catalyst for action...the experiences of my family members are with me through both the silences and the stories." Can you talk more about the power of silences and stories?

CER: The spoken word is powerful. I think we'd all acknowledge that, but silence certainly is as well. And rhetorically silence always has a meaning. It has a function. And I can't say that I'll speak certainly for all Black communities with my interpretation or with how I'm thinking about silence in this particular instance, but what I do know from my experience is that some stories, some experiences I think are either so sacred or so precious or so painful that to make them public is a heavy decision. When I spoke with family members about my project on the Free School, sometimes they would say, they had no problem talking with me and sharing their experiences in our own private home space. But they didn't want it to be made public for fear of it getting out into the world, into a space where that it could be critiqued or misunderstood.

And I think this was especially the case for family members who were unable to relocate from Prince Edward, and so who went the longest without having any access to public school. There was often this sense of, of shame around not having access to literacy in that particular way through formal education.

The idea that that people wouldn't understand or they would ask questions. I think this also comes from the fact that in the past, oftentimes when researchers would come into Prince Edward, especially in those early days after the schools closed, and then once they reopened, researchers would sort of swarm into the community, do testing on the students, ask questions or whatever and then they'd leave. And so, well, what happens once you have an interview with someone and you have no idea where that interview ends up, or you take a test and you have no idea what happens to the data that's being collected?

I think the idea was that this is a way that we can exercise, or I can exercise some control. I can decide who actually gets to hear my story. I think for many of us who are talking about race or writing about race, that certainly holds true. So there's some instances where the material, the story can't be shared because the concern is about how it will be received or, and I think this is something that I'm thinking a lot about now with my second project, whether or not it'll be received at all.

Just because you tell the story certainly does not mean that anyone has to listen to it or certainly to take time to pause and reflect and experience it with you. And when I think about the Free School Project, and when I think about my current project now where I'm thinking about transnational citizenship and public pedagogy, I know that I often have a concern, will people understand why I'm writing about this or how will this get taken up in different spaces?

I have to believe in the work. And I do. But anytime you share your story, I think you risk that people may not be as attentive or respectful as you want. It's something that I am very aware of. Anytime I enter into a research space, enter into a community rather as a researcher, and also just something that I think I'm attentive to as a person of color. Anytime I'm sharing my own personal stories about race. Because many of them are, as I say, quite painful to reflect upon and to make those things public, it's a big risk.

SW: I understand this next question is pressing into those experiences even more. So first, I want to acknowledge that. This question is based on a conference presentation you gave several years ago. Can you talk about pedagogies or perhaps particular strategies you use for facing resistance as a woman of color in the writing classroom?

CER: I think one of the first things that I had to realize was that resistance can come in many forms. So I've had students challenge me directly about course content. For example, if it was a course in cultural rhetorics or non-Western rhetorics. Why aren't we just talking about Aristotle? Or why are you making us read all this other stuff? I've had students verbalize their doubt that I was qualified to be an instructor or write course evaluations that were less about my teaching and more about just race and gender. And I guess I would say those things stay with you. So each time I have an experience like what I've described, it causes me to pause and reflect. Sometimes

in sadness, sometimes in frustration and sometimes to be honest with you, just with great concern.

How can I keep going? How can I keep doing this? Often what I talk about in terms of strategy and pedagogy is not really a tool per se, but I think it's more of a stance that I've come to adopt. The stance is that I know that I have something to share. So even if others, students, colleagues, whomever, even if they aren't always ready to have those conversations, to think about race critically, to think about identity and literacy, I know that I have something that is valuable and that needs to be shared. I know that I want to continue to learn and listen. So being in an academy affords me, I think, that privilege. My stance is that yes, I acknowledge that there are going to be challenges. I used to think a great deal any time before I walked into a classroom, "What will this be like?"

There was almost like a sense of dread and anticipation about what kind of anxiety I would have to confront. But I try to temper that now by saying, "What am I going to learn and what do I have to offer in this particular space?" So again, it's just acknowledging that yes, there's going to be challenge, there's going to be resistance, but these are spaces, the field of rhetoric and composition, the classroom, the university and the community spaces that I work in that I'm really committed to because I think that the issues I study, write and teach about are important for the greater good.

For me, this means that I have to be comfortable with myself and I have to be aware that I don't know what each experience is going to look like. I can't predict resistance. I have tried, as I said, but you lose sleep doing that. I'm always negotiating what it means to be a woman of color in these spaces. Some days are really, really good and amazing. Some days mean struggle. It is never the same, no matter the institution, no matter in the space that I'm in. I've also learned for me that it's important to have people and activities outside of the university that sustain and recharge me.

SW: You've mentioned your new research a few times and I know you're investigating BTS, a South Korean boy band and ARMY, their followers or their fans, and you've talked about how this work examines and intersects public pedagogy and trans nationalism. How about we end with that research? What are you working on?

CER: I'm working on a project now that really is asking some of the same questions I realized that I've been asking since grad school. So here I am, seven years removed from grad school, and still asking the same questions about what it means to teach citizenship and what implications does that have for us with regard to thinking about race and literacy? So last year I began a project that really looks at a different kind of citizenship education.

I'm looking at the way BTS, a Korean pop band and their fandom, who goes by ARMY, can be understood as a public pedagogy for global citizenship. So we have this group, BTS, who makes music in Korean that addresses a wide range of social justice issues. Everything from critiques on class, materialism and consumption, they're involved in campaigns against violence. And then you have their fandom who are literally made up of people from all over the world spanning all

ages, gender identities, nationalities, just a huge and wide demographic. And arguably, I think one of the most diverse fandoms in the world.

And what I see is that people take up these messages from the music as invitations for action in a world. There's really remarkable organizing that happens across languages, borders, cultures, and across difference and much of it happens online. I think that for those of us who are committed to thinking about social justice and supporting pedagogies that engage in this kind of work, it's important to also look at how this happens in spaces outside of traditional K-12 or university institutions.

What I've found is that there's a kind of teaching, learning and response that happens amongst the fandom that is really quite remarkable in the ways that they take up any number of critical issues. So environmental campaigns, issues around diversity and inclusion, politics. And again, this goes back to my ongoing effort to understand just it is people learn to be active, engaged participants in our world. And that learning does not always happen in school. And it also, thankfully, doesn't have to stop once we are of a certain age, it's ongoing. I really think that if we want to have hope for our world and for things to change, that it's important that we look at how people are learning what it means to think globally in just a wide array of spaces.

So this project is exciting, but it's also very different for me because the archive is so expansive. So I'm looking at BTS' lyrics, their vlogs and interviews and the structure in which they exist and I'm learning, once more, what it means to work with translations and the very careful work that has to be done when we move between and amongst languages. And I'm also, again to go back to our theme of listening, listening to ARMY and working to understand how these messages are interpreted and how it happens across communities and cultures when these lessons are enacted.

The other thing I guess I would just end with in terms of thinking about marginalization is that oftentimes fandoms, especially those associated with boy bands, get dismissed or relegated to just being a bunch of teenage girls screaming over the group. I think that view really dismisses and ignores the kind of social justice work that is possible by this particular community. I've learned that firsthand just by looking at grassroots projects and their online campaigns, in response to the music. Certainly there's always going to be some difference in how we come to express what it means to be a citizen.

I think part of what makes this project so interesting is looking at how those differences get worked out within the community. There's still a focus on recognizing individuals in their cultures, in their communities, but this bridge to work to understand these connections on a much larger scale.

SW: Thank you Candace, and thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.