Episode 39: Cecilia Shelton
Transcript

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

If you haven't already so, be sure to click that follow and subscribe button and rate and review the podcast. It would really mean a lot to me. In this episode, I talk with Cecilia Shelton about disrupting traditional technical and professional communication genres, embracing a Black Feminist pedagogical framework, digital and cultural rhetorics, social justice and antiracism, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

Cecilia D. Shelton is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Maryland, College Park. She is a technical and professional communication scholar whose work is situated at the intersections of digital and cultural rhetorics. In 2019, she earned her doctorate in Rhetoric, Writing, and Professional Communication from East Carolina University. Drawing on Black feminist theory and praxis, her research prioritizes the perspectives, goals, and experiences of Black people (and other communities structured into the margins) as a way to insist on more equitable solutions to contemporary social, political, and organizational problems. Her dissertation work argues that Black activism (and the Black rhetorical tradition in general) is a kind of technical communication and offers a methodology that enables a cultural rhetorical framing of technical and professional communication.

Cecilia, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I want to start by talking about your approach to teaching technical and professional communication. And one thing I know you do is you attempt to disrupt traditional norms or frameworks and expectations or assumptions about tech comm and professional genres. Do you mind talking about how you do this work?

CS: I think that coming into a sort of tech comm or business communications course, you have to start with where students are. And the first things that pop into their heads are the genres that they associate with, technical communication or professional communication, right? And so I start there. And what I've found out is that, even though lots of undergraduate students, some of them...you can't really profile them all in sort of one neat way, but lots of them have never worked a professional job before. Some of them have never worked any job before and others of them have different kinds of professional and work experiences.

But in spite of that, they all have really clear ideas and conceptions about what it means to communicate professionally. So they can name some of these genres, they can name emails and reports and memos and policies and handbooks as examples of technical and professional communication. And they can talk about the kinds of impressions they have of those genres, the kinds of expectations they have around those genres. And when you have these initial conversations with them, it's really clear that they have absorbed from just the culture in general,

if not whatever kinds of education they've already had in these areas, that they understand the norms that these forms of communication are meant to be objective and neutral and efficient and clear. And that they function in particular ways in institutions and organizations and industries and businesses.

Their interpretation of how those genres of writing function is that they're doing fair and neutral work, that they're not value-laden. So I think the ways that we might typically approach teaching students to communicate in these common genres is by introducing them to templates, in some cases, or more rhetorical approaches, even, talking about the audiences that they might be encountering through these styles or genres of communication, and what the generic features are. That's important, but I think we need to disrupt those notions that this kind of communication or any kind of communication can be neutral or objective.

I try to start with the idea that neutrality and objectivity that that's a myth. And I find that it's not enough just to say that we're not being neutral or objective, even though it feels like a report or a policy or an email does not have values embedded in it. It does. I feel like I want them to understand that we should pay attention to what values are embedded and how those are made less apparent to us because they come from the cultural norms that we are told are acceptable and how we then have an opportunity to be intentional about what kinds of values we want to take up when we're composing in those genres.

SW: In your article, "Shifting Out of Neutral" in Technical Communication Quarterly, you talk about using a Black Feminist pedagogy as a means for equity and social justice in technical and professional writing. This Black Feminist framework offers an alternative approach to teaching that helps you disrupt the traditional norms and expectations, right?

CS: It takes a different stance than a traditional Eurocentric masculinist kind of approach to pedagogy where lived experience isn't a valuable kind of evidence, where it's not necessary to feign this distance between your emotion and the object or the topic of your inquiry. Instead a Black Feminist epistemology and pedagogy invites students to value lived experience, to think about their personal expressiveness, to think about personal accountability, to think about ethics, think about people. I think it's important to ask students not to only think about the business context and the objects and the topics that we typically discuss when we're talking about business and technical communication. But to also think about who are the people in these environments? Who are our colleagues? Who are the publics that we're serving? Who are our supervisors, our customers?

Usually, that sort of figure in a student's mind is sort of a stick figure. But if we were to add flesh and bones to that stick figure, and not interrogate that, that stick figure would turn into probably a white, cisgender heterosexual man who's middle-class and educated, right? And that means something. And so I try to invite students to think about other people and think about the ways that the emails and reports and policies and documentation that they're composing, that they're

also composing the environments and the context that other people live and work and play and consume within those contexts that have been composed by those documents.

SW: So a Black Feminist pedagogical framework allows us to analyze and ask students to think about traditional professional communication genres, such as cover letters and resumes and reports. I'm interested in what those conversations look like in class and whether you bring in other technical and professional genres that maybe better complements this approach to teaching?

CS: Yeah, so I try to do both, because students are coming to the course expecting, and maybe needing, to get some experience with emails and resumes and cover letters and reports. They're like, "I need to know how to write this. I need to know how this is different than an essay." Or something like that. So I want them to have that practice. In fact, the example I talk about in the article and I've talked about other places is a good example of that. There, students are writing a report. Students need to know a report is a genre that's taken up in lots of different industries, lots of different contexts, it's a good skill for students to have that they could apply. I try to think of the kinds of genres that students can apply across different professional or public or industry contexts. Reports are one of those.

And so, yeah, I want them to learn about the genre conventions, about headings and subheadings and how reports need to be easy to navigate for readers because they're not reading them cover to cover, but they might use an executive summary, or they might use a table of contents to go to a particular page and move in different ways through the document. So we're talking about genre and we're thinking rhetorically in that way. But also, in the example that's in the article, they are advocating for the inclusion of a gender inclusive restroom and a lactation room in an office space. I think the way that it's framed in the assignment, it's in like a small tech company, right? I'm asking them also to think about issues that involve people.

In the tech industry, there is a dearth of women and gender non-conforming folks already. And so I'm asking them to think about gender in complex ways in the tech industry. And then I'm asking them to think about if, perhaps, you're operating in a space that has been dominated by men, what does it look like, to think about writing toward policy and articulating how a space comes to be, what the logic and the reasoning is for a space to an audience, maybe, of men, but about non-men, right? You're talking, maybe, to lots of men who don't have these lived experiences, but need to bring these spaces that are important into being. What does that mean? Might they not know what happens in the lactation room? Is it possible that they have not heard from or talked to or understand the perspective of someone who is working in a workplace and who is trans or gender nonconforming and needs to use the bathroom.

And so what I'm trying to help students understand is that when policies get composed around dress codes and what you're allowed to wear and how bodies are allowed to show up or not, and what spaces people are available and are not available and how people are allowed to exist in those spaces, then that report that justifies that space or doesn't, that policy that governs how

people are to use a space, it is composing how the people in that space get to exist. And I want students to consider lived experience as a valuable kind of evidence. They do other kinds of research, we talk about scholarly sources alongside trade publications, other sort of people working in the field, what are they saying to one another through trade publications? What are scholars saying? What new research? But also, let's hear the voices of people who might be affected by these issues. Let's take their lived experience seriously and let's center that.

SW: Your teaching also intersects digital and cultural rhetorics, too. I was hoping you could spend some time talking about what it looks like to take a social justice based approach to teaching online, and/or building and constructing online curriculum that centers on social justice?

CS: Yeah, that's a good question. So I'll marry my last answer and this one a little bit, because I didn't quite get to this part. But I think earlier you asked me about whether I'm looking for assignments or genres that adapt more to the social justice angle that I'm trying to take, and I do those traditional genres. But this past year, I added a project at the end that gets more at my own research and helping students to continue in this disruptive perspective on tech comms. So I asked students this spring and summer when I taught a version of this course to think about memes as a technical communication. And so that kind of connects to the digital piece, too. Especially, after mid-March, once everyone went online and we're in the midst of this pandemic, I'm asking them to think about how people are using social media and memes as a way to share information, as a way to solve problems, as a way to help people do things, to help people make decisions. I'm thinking about my ten-year-old, somehow, on TikTok or something, came across this meme to make a face mask out of a sock. And did. So she's making this argument that she can go to Target in, whatever it was, I don't know, April, because she's got this sock mask.

So yeah, I'm asking students to, at the same time as I want them to pay attention to those traditional genres, I do want them to be critical consumers and producers of language and communication in all of their discourse communities. And in a professional setting, that's going to be their emails and reports and stuff, but they're online and they're on social media and they are... even it's important for them to understand that, in this day and age, the companies that they work for are online and on social media. And that is a job for someone that didn't exist 10 or 15 years ago, somebody's managing social media and communicating on behalf of a company specifically on a Twitter account through memes. These are important sort of discursive tools that they may have a level of access to and facilitate with because they're accustomed to and native to that context a little bit. But I don't want to take for granted that they are consuming and producing those in ways that are critical and that they're applying these frameworks that I'm offering them to those contexts.

I try to pull those things together and I think there are ways we can do that around things like the pandemic and the kinds of stuff that we see coming out to help people navigate that. I think the activism that's happening right now, my research talks about activism as a kind of tech comm, specifically Black activism on Twitter in my diss and other kinds of activism. And so just

thinking about technical communication beyond these institutional, organizational, professional... even those words are laden with certain kinds of assumptions. And there is work happening outside of workplaces where people are getting paid. Activism is work. It's really, really important work. So how are folks communicating in order to make that activism happen and why aren't we pointing to that and calling it technical communication? And what happens when we do?

SW: You taught and worked as the writing center director at Saint Augustine's University, a small, private HBCU in Raleigh, North Carolina from 2008-2015. And you co-wrote an article in 2014 about writing centers and code meshing called "Disrupting Authority." You talk about resisting notions of "standardized" English, and you talk about marrying writing center practices with antiracism. How would you suggest writing centers go about doing this social justice, activist work intersecting writing center practices with antiracism?

CS: I love writing centers for so many reasons. In undergrad, I was a writing center consultant. I was an English major and a Spanish minor, and I was reading and writing in English and Spanish. And the writing center was just getting started and I started tutoring and I loved it. And so after my master's degree and the opportunity to work...so my master's degree, my degree is in English from NC State University, but my concentration was socio-linguistics. So I was thinking about language variation and dialect. And so it really felt like an interesting opportunity to teach writing at an HBCU and direct a writing center and bring all those parts of my experiences together. Because I understood that the students at the HBCU, I had been at an HBCU myself for undergrad, I knew that they would bring with them lots of dialects that were not considered standard English. And at the same time, I knew how important writing centers could be.

The thing that struck me then, and still strikes me now, about writing centers is that they're in a really interesting space because they aren't giving out grades. Students are coming for help. And there are other kinds, I recognize, of metrics of their success, but they're not giving out grades, but they do have a measure of authority around what is considered good writing on a campus. So the question is, how do you use that power? How do you use that ethos, that credibility to the audience of the campus community? And different campuses are different. There's different institutional contexts. So the answer to that question is not the same for every writing center, but it's a question every writing center can ask itself. "Here we are, we're the writing center. People trust us to say, 'What is good writing? Is there such a thing as good writing?'"

So you can think about that. And at Saint Aug we did. I spent some time in a graduate assistantship as an assistant director of the writing center at ECU where I did my doctoral work, so we did that there. You can think about that in terms of what happens when students walk into the space, what do they see? What books do they see? What authors do they see? What consultants do they see? How are those consultants prepared to talk about writing? How are they prepared? We've had students write to their own language for decades now, how do we operationalize that? How do you talk to students about the choices that they're making and the

implications of those choices? How do you follow their lead about how much they want to resist or align themselves with different kinds of choices?

What is your center stance on the topics, the things that students are writing about? So what are you affirming in what students bring in? What does the space feel like? What kinds of bathrooms are available in the writing center? Going back to the assignment that I had my tech comm students doing. There are messages about who the writing center is in relationship to the students and the staff and the faculty. How do you engage people other than students and faculty? Staff, how can you serve them? Who are they and what do they need? So I think there are all kinds of ways that writing centers can think about the kinds of power that they have and the kinds of ethos they have and what it means to hold that power and use it in meaningful ways, in service of marginalized communities.

It's important, not just for Black students or other students of color, but for white students, to walk in and see these examples elevated and taken seriously. And to understand that there are ways of inquiry, there are kinds of language that are equally valuable, that have important things to say, and to grapple with them. And for them to not be the audience all the time and for them to sit with that and for it to be okay with that. "Actually, this person is not talking to or about you and so that's okay. You'll be all right." You can sit with that. You can ask questions about it and you can learn from it. I've done that for a long time, so it's okay.

SW: So we've talked about a Black Feminist pedagogical framework to teaching, and you just shared about directing the writing center at Saint Augustine's University. You also went to Winston-Salem State University, a public HBCU in North Carolina, as an undergrad. As a graduate student, you taught at NC State and East Carolina University. I was hoping you could talk about all these different institutional contexts and sites, and maybe even more specifically, how HBCUs have shaped who you are as a teacher and scholar?

CS: I said before that I love writing centers, I also love HBCUs. They are amazing and important institutions. They're not without problems, sure. But they are incredibly valuable in the landscape of higher education. As a student, and lots of people have this narrative, it's not unique to me, but I was a high achieving kid in high school and so I did honors AP classes, whatever. But when I went to my HBCU, I was not one of a few Black kids in those classes anymore. And it was such an affirming experience because my Blackness was centered and valued, and I was able to expand even my own notions of Blackness. I was able to see the heterogeneity, the vastness of the identities and experiences of Blackness. And that gave me the confidence to move into graduate work at NC State.

So when I was then an instructor at Saint Augustine's University, I knew how important it was for me to be there with and for those students. I knew the kinds of relationships my professors had with me. I knew how meaningful they were. And I know that students have these kinds of experiences at other institutions too, but I knew how special HBCUs were from the student perspective. As an instructor, what taught me the most, I guess, is seeing that vastness from the

other side. So in one classroom, I would have students who were coming to HBCUs in the tradition of their families and communities as a legacy of HBCU attendees. I had students who had been standout students in high school and chosen an HBCU and had the choice of other kinds of institutions, too. And I had students for whom HBCUs offered them an opportunity when other institutions would not.

All of that inside of one classroom, the range that I needed to teach to, that taught me a lot. You had to show up and you had to know what you were doing. You had to engage all those students. I think that that range in an HBCU classroom, there's range in every classroom, right? But I just have that having to prepare and engage with all of those students, take them seriously and meet them where they were, but also find a way to bring us all together around topics that were meaningful to them, I learned to pay attention to the different kinds of experience and expertise students brought to the classroom. So students have different lived experiences that are valuable, that teach them a lot of important things beyond what you can learn in the classroom, but that are valuable when you do bring them into a classroom.

I've been public, private, big, small, HBCU, PWI, regional, I have been at lots of different kinds of institutions with lots of different kinds of students. The students I was serving at East Carolina University, that I was writing about in that article, a lot of those students were conservative white men from rural eastern North Carolina. Not the same at all as my students at Saint Aug. And so I think that keeping my own commitments, pedagogical commitments, but having different audiences for those commitments and for that pedagogy, I think I learned the...what's the word I want to use? To be flexible and nimble and the dexterity as a teacher from my HBCU experiences.

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