

Episode 88: Charissa Che

Transcript

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In this episode, I talk with Charissa Che about taking a translingual approach to teaching writing, Asian and Asian American experiences in U.S. higher education, issues of language and power, untold narratives, and the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) National Conference.

Charissa Che is an Assistant Professor of English at Queensborough Community College (CUNY). Her teaching and scholarship centers on cultural rhetorics, translingualism, and second language writing pedagogy. In particular, she investigates how Asians and Asian Americans navigate institutional spaces in their language and identity practices in ways that are resistive, agentive, and community-building. Her writing has appeared in *Teaching English at the Two-Year College (TETYC)* and *Writing on the Edge (WOE)*, and her research on the writing placement of second-language English speakers in community colleges is set to be published in the edited collection, *Writing Placement in Two-Year Colleges: Case Studies of Postsecondary Education in Transition*, in 2022. Che has served as the Editorial Fellow of TETYC, and is currently the TETYC Book Review Editor, and the 2022 Program Chair of the TYCA (Two-Year College Association) National Conference. She was the recipient of the 2019 CCCC Chairs' Memorial Scholarship and the 2018 CCCC Scholars for the Dream Award, respectively.

Charissa, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You teach at Queensborough Community College. Your teaching and research interests include translingualism and cultural rhetorics. Can you talk more about your approach to teaching and what that looks like in practice at Queensborough Community College?

CC: Yeah, I get this question a lot just because Queensborough Community College is a really unique kind of institution. First, I think that there needs to be more scholarship and discourse around community colleges in general and writing studies, but Queensborough is located in the borough of Queens in New York City, and it's one of the most diverse regions, not just in the city, but the world. Linguistically, racially, culturally, all of that. And QCC is a majority-minority institution. That's what people are calling it, but it's essentially mostly racial minorities, and most of the student body is non-white and a large percentage of the student body is also first-gen college students. They speak a language other than English at home. So what that means is that the stakes are high for how we teach writing and how we treat English as a language, especially our discourses around standard English and how we kind of prize that traditionally in the classroom.

I think that in my teaching, always, in my previous institutions, but especially here, is to keep in mind that who gets to define what language is and what languages are valid. Ultimately they

have the power to shape the world and to shape citizenship. I think it's really important among students with diverse backgrounds to mobilize those differences, not just linguistically, but to treat language in conjunction with identity, alongside issues of race, of culture, of class, of gender, of all different types of intersections of identity, and validating that by asking them to write about it, and by also allowing them to read literature that reflects their own experiences. I think that that is the key to empowering them and validating them so that they see themselves as key contributors in the classroom, but also in society. I think historically, higher education has prized certain types of Englishes, certain types of communicative abilities as more valuable than others, and my teaching aims to challenge that.

SW: So thinking about how institutionally diverse Queensborough Community College is and reflecting on your pedagogy and practice, maybe you could talk more about translanguaging and how taking this approach to teaching has informed your understanding of literacy and the teaching of writing. What are some of the affordances of taking a translanguaging approach to teaching writing, and what scholarship has influenced your views?

CC: I think that translanguaging is something that we do in everyday life. So helping students see that they already do that, that they already...the way I first understood translanguaging is through my advisor from grad school, Jay Jordan. And he described it as being able to turn the dials up and down on a radio, as you see appropriately in a given social context. I think we all do that. Maybe first-gen college students are less familiar with how to do that in academia because they're the first ones navigating that space. But I try to liken translanguaging to things like texting.

I often begin the semester by asking my students to do kind of a chart where I ask them, "Okay, pretend you are texting your parents versus texting your friend and just write a text about any particular subject, what you're going to do this weekend. And then think about how you're using maybe acronyms, how you're using certain jargon, how your tone is different." So really asking them to do this kind of metacognitive reflection on their own writing to realize that they already do these things. They already turn the dial intuitively. I think helping them recognize that they already do this. And that it's just a matter of transferring it into the classroom, kind of lowers the level of pressure that they might feel at the top of the semester.

I also like having them do a literacy narrative, but complicating the idea of what literacy is. Traditionally, I think that we teach writing a literacy narrative, as tell me about one of your first experiences is with reading and writing and ultimately how that has shaped who you are as a reader and writer. I think that that kind of has this connotation that all of your experiences with literacy is a means to an end of succeeding in academia, which shouldn't really be the case. In writing classes, we are teaching people how to think, how to write, but for their own sake, not necessarily for a job or a grade. I try to complicate what literacy is and what language is. So again, kind of trying to drill down the idea that it's not even necessarily a written language, it's not an alphabet, but it could be coding. It could be music, it could be arts.

So asking them to reflect on their own already existing literacies, the things that they are passionate about, the things that they don't do for a grade and helping them recognize that they could write about those things. I allow them to write about pretty much any kind of literacy in

the broad sense for their literacy narratives, so that again, they can position themselves as an expert in their own experiences and also kind of feel like they can teach me and that sounds trite. But when I teach, I try to really establish that I'm there to learn from them as well. I have my own expertise as a professor, but I also have these other identities and I try to share with them that. I'm a musician. I have a past in music journalism. We all have these rich lives. I try to bring that into my pedagogy as much as possible.

And in terms of scholarships, I already mentioned Jay Jordan. So early on in my graduate studies, I was fortunate enough to come across the works of Paul Matsuda, Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Suresh Canagarajah, especially. I think that all of them bring this really important approach to teaching writing that has to do with agency. And it's what I try to foster in my own classroom is to help my students recognize that they have choice.

And of course, the kind of challenge comes with how do you assess things when you offer too much agency, whatever that means. You still have to have a rubric. You still have to have some form of "standardization" to assess students. And so that's where the grappling comes. But I think that more scholars, more instructors need to approach at least teaching writing, with a sense of empowerment, so, that's something I really appreciate about all of their scholarship.

What I like about Canagarajah, in particular, is that he kind of talks about students being poly-literate, having a poly-literate orientation to writing or being simultaneously bilingual. When we talk about being bilingual or ESL students, I think we tend to compartmentalize their language proficiencies into, they speak this as a first language, so that must mean that this is their natural language, and this is something that they acquire, so it's mimicking proficiency. And that sets up a really basic monolithic point of view towards these students. And it's more complicated than that. So just languages or literacies in the broader senses, treat students as simultaneously bilingual or multilingual, is a way to complicate their identities and to prevent us from looking at them in these boxes.

SW: Your research focuses specifically on the experiences of Asian and Asian-American students in US higher education. You wrote this great article. I would encourage everyone to read it, in Writing on the Edge, called, "The Mirror, the Canvas, and a Case for Anger: Why Asian-American Stories Matter." I highlighted this quote in it, "Telling our stories is important, if we are ever to understand the ideologies of power that have shaped the way we see and treat ourselves and others." Do you mind expanding on this quote and talking more about the importance of storytelling and listening to Asian-American experiences in higher education?

CC: Yes, and I am really grateful that you asked this question, especially as it targets Asian-Americans. I think that in our field, historically, of course, it's very white and we're still working away from that, but Asian-Americans, I think, hold a very unique position in writing studies and also just American history. I think in order to totally answer this question, I kind of have to go into Asian-American history. First off, thank you for the kind words on my piece. I would want to actually say that when I first wrote it, it was intended to be a blog entry. I think that that matters because I went into it with a different set of expectations for myself, for what tone to use, for how accessible I want it to be.

So the fact that it was published as an academic article was really validating for me, as well as I think the students that I shared it with, to help them realize, you can talk in your own voice and it is academic. Whatever that means, is what you can make of it.

So in terms of the Asian-American story, it's important to understand what sets it apart from other ethnic groups in our history. So you may have heard of the model minority myth, that stereotype. Basically posits that Asian-Americans are almost predisposed genetically, or just inherently to be successful. This kind of idea that they are academically, professionally and otherwise predisposed to just excel without consideration of the work that they might put into it, or the challenges that they might face or any shortcomings that they may have as people. It also posits that they are family oriented, that they're just ideal citizens. And that myth was created strategically, not out of flattery toward the population, but strategically by those in power to pit Asian-Americans against other racial minorities. And we still see the effects of that today.

We still see this kind of rift between racial minorities and this kind of invalidation toward Asian-Americans' struggles. We've seen that most recently with the attacks toward Asian-Americans in light of COVID. And even I've noticed kind of a lack of legitimation toward those attacks versus others. It wasn't always this way, I think. So there was the transcontinental railroad. There was the gold rush. All of those events happened and Asian-Americans, specifically Chinese-Americans, they had access to participate in the American economy around the 1860s, but they were essentially used like many minoritized populations in America. It was a form of exploitation, their labor. When they were excluded, it was on the premise, and we see this ideology still today with different groups, but it was on the premise that they were taking away people's jobs that they were taking up too much space.

So it was kind of an inversion of the model minority thing. So they weren't allowed access to a lot of jobs that other people had. They had to strategically think about what they can do if they wanted to still live in America. When the exclusion laws were repealed, ultimately, it was not that long ago, it was in the 1940s. But that's when the model minority myth started to be promoted as a wedge between Asian-Americans and other minorities. With all of this history having been established, I think a lot of people, we need to talk more about these histories. This kind of discrimination is systemic. It is coming from powerful people and it's not among minorities. We don't share this power. We are recipients of the consequences of this power.

The effects of this kind of wielding of power, it may be different. It may manifest itself differently among racial groups, but there are certainly overlaps. So I think that understanding histories, of listening to each other's stories, it speaks to a larger systemic problem, I think, that we have historically ignored in the teaching of history, but also it's reflected in how we teach writing, with the idea of standard-ness as correctness. Understanding each other's histories can help us understand how we all kind of share this, I think, struggle to push back against authority and how in many ways, we've kind of internalized the stereotypes that may have been imposed on us. And so there are many things that may hold back a racial minority or otherwise marginalized person from success. And I think instead of internalizing it, we should question, critically question, the systems in place, that have led us to feel the way that we do.

SW: Charissa, are there certain ways you talk about these histories and talk about issues of language and power with students in the classroom? And then, how do you disrupt this “standardized” view of language?

CC: So I think that combining this idea of what constitutes “canon” with authors that have dared to use non-standard English, to have those models for my students to read as a starting point is so important. So I've had them read Gloria Anzaldúa, of course, Victor Villanova, Keith Gilliard, who uses code switching a lot from academic English and African-American vernacular English. Sherman Alexie, talking about being a Native American and kind of the obstacles that he's had to face to overcome these stereotypes placed on his group in order to succeed academically. But having them read pieces from people of color, from bilingual people, I think is really important as a model to them to see that they too can succeed, whatever that means for them. I like to talk a lot about translanguaging and code switching in my classes. I often use those readings as a template to then just kind of transition into informal discussions about, do you code switch?

And again, this might speak more to QCC student body that they are more aware or capable of code switching. They're more aware of when they do it because a lot of them are multilingual. What occasions do you code switch? Why do you do it? And sometimes I encourage them to do it in the classroom. I like to put them in groups to kind of do that either with common languages or not languages that they don't share, so kind of examine why do we code switch? Why do we use multiple languages? What is the benefit of using non-standard Englishes and why really is standard English prized historically above these other Englishes.

I like to talk about world Englishes. So related to that, to talk about kind of the inner, outer emerging circles of Englishes and why certain Englishes have been placed in the circles that they have been placed. It's coming from the people who have colonized other countries. And so thinking about trying to denaturalize standard English, and to look at it, not necessarily as lesser than other Englishes, but to think about it as just level, as something that can be used strategically, just as much as other Englishes, because of trans languaging can help, I think, students feel more in control of their languages. It's just one of the many things in their toolkits. It's not the ultimate thing.

SW: You're the Program Chair of the 2022 Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) National Conference in Chicago. And the CFP asked this question, “What untold narratives and histories pertaining to writing in Two-Year Colleges and our students' lives can be uncovered and mobilized to create more inclusive learning spaces that reflect our diverse student bodies?” I would love to hear you reflect on this question and answer this as it applies to your own teaching, your own students, and your own two-year institutional context.

CC: More and more we as a society are realizing the importance of understanding how our histories connect with our present. Because if we don't learn from our histories, then we're going to repeat it, as the cliché goes. But I really do believe that, and because of just events that have happened in the past few years, pandemic aside, if you can think of it as an aside, we started talking about things the Chinese Exclusion Act. We started talking about Black Wall Street and the Tulsa Race Massacre. And even with the pandemic, we started talking about how we have

handled pandemics in the past, effectively/ineffectively. I think that talking about these pasts are so important because it causes us to question, why haven't we been taught them in schools?

I admittedly, and I want to be transparent about this, I haven't learned about the aforementioned events until really later in life, when I started caring more about race issues, when I started reflecting on my own racial identity, but I probably would've thought more about it, had I been taught about it in school earlier on. I think that instructors should be equipped with these histories, so that they can share them with their students and have the students really think about how they can use these stories to shape how they feel about their racial identity, how they can contribute to the bigger racial discourse or just any social discourse so that they can make change as global citizens.

I think that similar to how translingual approaches and cultural rhetorics in the classroom can help us realize our connections with each other, so can our histories. Histories is, I think, talking about histories, can be seen as some translingual approach because it helps us recognize where we connect.

We don't talk too much about how Grace Lee Boggs helped her husband. Grace Lee Boggs was Asian-American, and she helped her husband, James Boggs, who was black with the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. So understanding respective histories of specific groups, but also how they overlap, how we have been allies to each other in history can be, I think, really empowering and really inspiring for the kinds of actions we take going forward. I think that this is also a way to ultimately help students connect their experiences with these histories, to recognize patterns, to think critically about power structures. Two-Year Colleges, again, are really important sites for these conversations. They have historically served as a big example to four-year institutions for issues like open admissions, developmental education, self-directed placements, but also how to create inclusivity for diverse student bodies. We talk a lot about, how can we be more inclusive?

We use the word diversity sometimes as a catchall, nice little phrase to maybe make ourselves look good and accepting. But Two-Year Colleges is where we see that in action. The exigence to address issues of inclusivity is right in front of us at Two-Year Colleges because of how diverse the students are. So I think that I'm excited. I'm really excited for this conference, for the proposals that we're going to get, because I think that this is where a lot of the conversation can stem, from instructors, from students, from scholars who have real close experiences with fostering inclusive communities, classroom communities, that allow students from all different types of backgrounds, to share their stories and to come up with real ideas on how to become activists. I ultimately feel like the writing classroom is a site for activism.

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