

Episode 29: Christina V. Cedillo

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Christina V. Cedillo about her teaching and research on affect and embodiment, critical embodiment pedagogies, invisible disabilities, connections between racism and ableism, disability studies and technology, and teaching basic writing.

Christina V. Cedillo is Assistant Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Houston-Clear Lake. Her research examines embodied rhetorics and rhetorics of embodiment in the intersections of race, gender, and disability, and highlights these issues in the creation of critical inclusive pedagogies. Drawing on critical race theory, disability rhetorics, and decolonial theories, her work highlights Latinx, disabled, and undocumented activism and other rhetorical praxes in response to historical and contemporary rhetorics of dehumanization. Her work has appeared in *College Composition & Communication*, *RSQ*, *Composition Forum*, and other journals and edited collections. She is also co-founder and lead editor of the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*, an online, open-access venue dedicated to the study of multimodality, particularly among marginalized communities and in commonplace contexts.

Christina, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I want to start with your article in Composition Forum “What Does it Mean to Move?” And I mention it again later, it’s open access – and it’s such a lovely article so be sure to go read it and check it out. In it, you write, “Rhetoric privileges movement—emotional, ethical, physical. Hence, composition pedagogy aims to teach students to move others toward particular stances or courses of action. These goals often rely on normative standards of emotional engagement and activity, based in standards of white eurowestern ablebodiedness that associate certain kinds of movement with agency and expression...I argue that we must strive for critical embodiment pedagogies, or approaches that recognize and foreground bodily diversity so that students learn to compose for accessibility and inclusivity.” Your teaching and research focus on affect and embodiment. Can you talk about what this looks like in terms of practices in your writing classroom?

CC: So some of the things that I do have to do with pedagogy and then some of them have to do with more of the spatial practice. And of course it's all pedagogy in certain ways. So on the one hand, there's the more concrete hands on aspect of teaching writing. And so some of the things that I do is that I deliberately center things like affect and embodiment when we're studying writing. But so one of the things that I'll have students do is, we'll do analysis of texts, but rather than talk about logical meaning, I'll have them go through and talk about their emotional reactions to specific aspects of the text and what that does for them to either agree or disagree or pay closer attention, or to just check out. To get them to understand that that's what rhetoric really is, right?

Because I do agree wholeheartedly when Victor Villanueva talks a lot about how we've denigrated pathos so much in the teaching of writing, assuming that it's wrong because it's being used wrong, that's one of the things that I really want to rescue. So I always want to remind them that whether it's Cicero or Augustine or even today, that rhetoric always does the three things, it's to think, feel, and do. So we usually do the think, but we never really stop to think about what we want people to feel. I also talk to them a lot about how the feel part of it is what usually gets people to do, right? And so that's where the teaching of ethics really has to stand out. I have them do a lot of reflections also – a thing where it's like a shorthand version of speech act theory – where we talk about the different levels of meaning. I'll do some acting in the classroom, so for example, even just the idea of saying "good morning," on the surface level, it's very much about just a greeting, but it also, it's a statement that enacts authority, right? Socially it demands a response and then it has those psychological effects too, that if you don't respond when your professor says "good morning," it's like, oh no, what's she going to think?

And so these are a lot of the things that we talk about when students are writing, I'll have them actually write down what they would like people to experience and how well they thought that they did that. And then that goes a long way towards thinking a lot about who the audience is and being actually inclusive versus just thinking of them as a generic fiction. And what are some of the ways of giving people that little shout out, that, "I see you" and also talking about the multimodal needs of disabled audiences.

SW: Christina, you're doing so much pedagogically – intersecting affect, embodiment, ethics, accessibility, and multimodality. Do you mind defining a critical embodiment pedagogy for those unfamiliar with this kind of approach to teaching?

CC: I currently am working on this project where I'm actually articulating it because I realized when I wrote "What Does It Mean to Move?" that I hadn't actually defined it. I just assumed that people would get the gist of it. So critical embodiment pedagogy for me, although it might look different for other people, it draws on things like decolonial studies. It has very much to do with that ethical responsibility of knowing whose land we're on and why it matters and how it affects everything. Like gender norms, how colonization has rendered certain populations like trans folks and non-binary folks and gender queer folks, especially vulnerable, right? By promoting that gender binary. So it automatically leads us to talking about things like why we might use, "they," instead of "he," "she," right? There's always that theoretical and then the practical aspects. Then it also draws on critical race theory, feminist rhetorics, disability rhetorics, critical pedagogy. And so those, I think that's the five things that I'm really trying on, right.

And then they all combine in this need to, as Faraday said, to recognize students essential humanity, and for students to recognize the humanity of others, while also allowing students to contend with the fact that when we're writing, it doesn't just happen in a vacuum, we're constantly inundated. I think as a field, now, we're finally starting to think about those things. When we think about new materialism and the different forms of ontology and how we're affected by it. But for me, I thought it was very important to center marginalized perspectives because growing up, you can't not think about these things. You have to think about, "What do I have to do in order to be seen or heard? What are all the influences that will prevent me from entering a college classroom?" And things like that. So realizing that, especially in moments –

our current political and environmental moment – we have to make interventions where we remind people why all of this matters.

SW: As I mentioned earlier, everyone should read “What Does it Mean to Move?” In it, you’re talking about marginalized experiences, you focus on the relationship between rhetoric and bodies, and you write about your own experiences as a Chicana living with several invisible disabilities. Do you think you could talk a bit about how writing and rhetoric becomes oppressive or is oppressive for teacher-scholars and students with invisible disabilities?

CC: That right there is the reason why I wrote this article in the first place. You definitely hit the nail on the head. So basically, one of the things that is a big discussion within disability rhetorics is the way in which non-disabled audiences tend to really think about disability in a specular way where people expect to see certain characteristics or else you can't possibly be disabled. And so, for example, when it comes to invisible disabilities, I even recently had a conversation with somebody who's really close to me who tends to be really thoughtful about stuff, but it's that conversation about, “Well, you're not really disabled, why are you calling yourself disabled?” And it's like, “Well, I have disabilities, they're mental disabilities that I have to deal with.” I have neurodivergent and it affects the way that I see the world, it's a very different experience from the normate. And so it became this thing about, “Well, you're only disabled because you say you are, if you didn't see yourself that way you could do all these other things”.

And I'm like, “I never said disability was wrong or bad, I actually appreciate my disabilities because they give me very useful perspectives.” They inform the way that you read yourself and others and I think in certain ways, they also make me, I think, more attuned to read people generously and from a relational standpoint, right? Like understanding, “Oh, well they might not understand things in this particular way.” One of the things that I wanted to write about was the fact that if we really think about it, invisible disabilities aren't really that invisible, because people tend to think that the material prosthesis looks a particular way, there's a wheelchair or there's other technology that we need to use. But if we think about, about it, when I have to take my medication, that's a different kind of prosthesis, right? In a way.

The thing about it is that the invisible isn't so invisible when you're sitting in class and people start thinking like, “Oh, that behavior is odd or why can't they understand this? Or why are you writing like this?” Thinking about writing and rhetoric as normative proxies can actually be really oppressive because I've seen people who are doing some really brilliant things who are writing and composing arguments from very invitational stances. This is what it feels like to be me speaking to you as one person to another. And then have people like journal editors just say, “I don't know what you're doing, this is terrible.” Or, “This person clearly is not scholarly because they're not doing it in a very methodical or very typical way.” One of the reasons why I co-founded the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* is so that there could be space for those sorts of stories. Because I have experienced that, where an editor basically said that my writing was very stilted, although he did not use that language, he deliberately used very opaque, jargon, even as he was accusing me of doing the same.

And the implication was that maybe I was an international scholar, which again shows the way that ableism and racism tend to go together. So I think that's part of the thing that we need to

push back against. There needs to be room for ways of presenting or witnessing certain academic moments, current moments from that perspective. And the only way that that can get captured is if we're allowed to write in the ways in which we're interpreting these events, instead of, being made to fit into certain boxes. One of the things that we need to realize, like Tara Wood's work, where she talks about how attention to disability isn't just checking off boxes, it's always about a stance, it's always about an approach. And of course, then we can see what that work can actually look like. So if you read Melanie Yergeau's book, I mean, it's just amazing. And it's funny and it's emotional and it's engaging and it's very real.

SW: You mentioned how racism and ableism often go together. Can you talk about that more?

CC: That's one of the things that I'm hoping that some of this work does, I think for a really long time, unfortunately, between critical race theory and disability studies, there's been a breach and there are very specific scholars whose work is really great because it shows how they work together. So I'm thinking about people like Nirmala Erevelles, whose work in education shows how ableism is used to perpetuate racism and vice versa. People like Ellen Samuels who actually traces the history, Jay Dolmage, right, who looks at this from the perspective of immigration. And so one of the things that we really see is that it all comes down to ontology as entelechy, right? For all that we talk about science, I don't know that we ever got away from eugenics obviously. And so that when you start to think about ontology in that Aristotelian way, it should look a certain way, or it should act a certain way or sound a certain way, then that normativity automatically becomes that eugenics the apparatus.

So one of the things that my research looks at is that with the rise of science, one of the things that of course people wanted to do was racial taxonomies. So when you start to see the various races get characterized, the language is very much ableist language, how infantile is this group of people. And so it's always this retroactive process where people aren't racist because they think bad things. It's very much, they think those things to excuse the racism. And so vice versa what we see a lot in the education system is that students who are non-English speakers will often be put into special education classrooms because there aren't any resources for students who don't speak English. Or we see that a lot, too, with class where, obviously the student grows up in a house with access to books and you're used to literacy as an everyday thing, you're probably going to be ahead of the curve. But students from poor households, of course, are often told that they're deficient or that they need extra help, or they are, "special needs."

And of course, class tends to break down along racial lines as well. So, I mean, there's just a big history of this. I have a project that I just completed, it should be out next year.

SW: Your work also intersects multimodal rhetorics and multimodal pedagogy with disability studies. I think it would be really good to talk about a disability studies approach to technology and teaching online?

CC: Well, there's the really practical aspects. So for example, how to design a PowerPoint with disabled audiences in mind, right? Where you use alt-texts if you're going to upload that online. Certainly, people on the CDICC (Committee on Disability Issues) and the disability SIG in 4Cs (Conference on College Composition and Communication) have really been active in trying to get

people to think through these things. So for example, providing conference copies, right, in regular and large print. And for most people they tend to think of that as, it's just a courtesy – and it's not. It's an appeal to multimodality because the person is there and you may be seeing them and, or listening to them, and you also have access to the paper. Depending on, so for example, as someone with ADHD, neurodivergent people can often use the paper to follow along and it helps us to, it's like a recursive process. So it's definitely an approach that has to be conditioned over time, right? Where people might not think about certain things, but then as you start trying to become much more open, inclusive, generous, you're like, "Oh, what about this group of people? What about this group of people?"

I think in the practical aspect, that's what that might manifest as. For me, I think that disability studies and also thinking about things like race and culture really opened the door to what I call a critical multimodality. For me, critical multimodality is when we think through multimodality from that perspective, that automatically is going to center what has been construed as difference. And also thinking through what difference itself allows to be an affordance. Because just because we all have access to the same technology or media doesn't necessarily mean that those modes are going to mean the same, depending on who we're talking to, right? Certain cultures are going to prefer certain things. So I think for me, disability studies, really, it allows for us to really start considering what it could be to remix multimodality itself.

Where for a long time, and this is my common argument, is that we've tended to privilege the digital at the expense of, as we were speaking earlier, like there's some students with everything going on right now, who might not have access to internet. What does that look like? When Kress is talking about limitations and affordances, I think for a long time, we've really taken those terms for granted without necessarily interrogating what it means to be an affordance. Because, so for example, one of the things about digital tech is that now we can throw in a YouTube video and people can see what you're talking about, especially if it's like a, "how-to." But that affordance, isn't an affordance if you're talking about an audience that has visual impairment, right? And your reliance on that particular mode is actually a limitation.

SW: I want to end with a question about teaching basic writing. Earlier we talked about how teachers must consider how spaces are racialized and classed, who occupies certain spaces, who is making decisions, who has agency, what language are we using, what terms, what associations. In your article "Relating Our Experiences: The Practice of Positionality in Student-Centered Pedagogy" (2019), you talk about the importance of sharing experiences with students and how it's important for students to hear from teachers who come from marginalized backgrounds. Can you talk about the impact sharing experiences, which is often a really vulnerable activity, has on students in a basic writing classroom, which is often a really vulnerable site?

CC: Yeah, I think that vulnerability is actually, at the risk of sounding sentimental, I think that vulnerability is a really beautiful thing, because it means that we trust people, right? Whether it's students trusting each other or their professor. And I think for me, for nothing else, to think that my students trust me to come to me to talk about writing, is something that I don't take for granted, because it's never just about the writing, it's about who they are, right. As they're expressing themselves in language. Story is really important, right? As a cultural rhetorician, and

I'm always telling people, you have to reach on [Shawn] Wilson's research on ceremony because from an indigenous perspective, and certainly it's a perspective that really reflects my own background, it's very much about how, when we do research, we always want to work from a position of respect, relationality, and reciprocity.

So what does it mean to respect our students when they are indeed very vulnerable in the classroom? What does it mean to engage the notion of relationality where it's never this monolithic – the teachers up here and the students are down here, it's very much about, I can't be a teacher without you, right. And without the teacher, how are you a student? Although I think that students are able to be students without a professor, more often than professors can profess without the students. Then, of course, that reciprocity, it always has to go back and forth. So for me, I think that that's where story really comes in.

I always tell stories and sometimes they're not flattering, sometimes it requires for me to be very vulnerable and to admit that I messed up, and this is what I learned. And I'm sharing this with you so that you don't have to go through that. I think it's very important that if students are coming into this space and are vulnerable, professors should also be vulnerable in the sense that vulnerability is not a bad thing.

Again, it creates community, it allows people to know that we feel safe within this space, but also we can model vulnerability – and not to say that I want to add critical to everything, right – but I think there are such things as critical vulnerabilities where we create spaces, where we all feel like it's okay to let our guard down and to open ourselves up to share who we are so that people can really know us. I mean, in the end, I think that that's what rhetoric and composition are about. Especially when we're writing from a personal perspective, you are literally giving a piece of yourself and who knows what people are going to do with this. So I think the professor, the instructor, should always be the first person who is willing to do the things that we expect our students to do. I would not expect my students to be vulnerable in the classroom or to put themselves on the spot without me doing that. I think it shows that it's okay for them to do that and I think it also shows that I'm human and I'm really flawed and fallible.

It's okay not to know everything, I don't know everything. And we're never going to get things 100%. Even when you think about things like disability and frameworks, like universal design for learning where we're trying to make spaces as inclusive as possible, we know we're never going to get 100%. That's not the point, I mean, it's the end goal, but the point is to constantly be trying to do better by each other. And the only way we're going to do that is if we talk to each other from an open stance.

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