Episode 24: Cruz Medina
Pedagogue podcast
Transcript

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

In this episode I talk with Cruz Medina. We talk about multimodal composition, digital writing and multicultural rhetoric, social justice and social media, and integrating technology in the writing classroom.

Cruz Medina is assistant professor of rhetoric and composition at Santa Clara University, where he teaches courses on writing and Latinx rhetoric. He is the 2018-2020 co-chair of the NCTE/CCCC Latinx caucus and has taught courses for the Bread Loaf School of English since 2016. He co-edited a digital collection called *Racial Shorthand: Coded Discrimination Contested in Social Media*.

Cruz, thanks for joining us.

SW: Let's start with a pedagogical definition given your research and teaching interests in technologies and digital writing. How would you define multimodal composition?

CM: I think my definition of multimodal composition is pretty standard, just in terms of the different modalities we hear from (Kristin) Arola and (Dawn) Shepherd, sort of the visual, oral, gestural, facial and linguistic. And I think that might even come from the New London Group. I feel like those kinds of work really well. I'm also a big fan of Jody Shipka though, too, and I know she likes to throw in thinking about taste and even smell, things like that, which I think highlight multi-modality as much as we think about it, things like video and podcasts or websites. It still connects with things that are not digital as well, so I think that's a good reminder, too, in thinking about how we're using all these different modes of communication that aren't always digital. However, I think in the digital, we tend to bring them together really well. And I think for the purposes, going back to what Kathleen Blake Yancey said like 15 years ago, this is really good to think about in terms of teaching and preparing students for 21st century skills that they're going to need to use.

SW: Your teaching intersects digital writing and multicultural rhetoric, and you focus on issues of social justice, race, and literacy. Can you talk about that connection and how digital writing and multicultural rhetoric come together in your classroom?

CM: Sure, so I think the connection between digital writing and multicultural rhetoric for me almost goes back to James Berlin and thinking about the idea of the social epistemic and thinking always how when we're writing we're never really disconnected from the cultural influences of, or the knowledge in a specific geographic space that we're writing in. I think even when we're

composing in these digital spaces, they're still really informed by this cultural knowledge or traditions that are happening.

I'm someone who's used a blog for more than 10 years. What I found was, there was certain traditions... yeah, I guess traditions, because it was Natalie Martinez's video that she created that really inspired me for the idea of the digital testimonio. I could kind of see that tradition that she was borrowing from. So I think as much as we want to say there's a certain neutrality for some of these digital platforms, we can definitely see that how we're using them is definitely informed by rhetorical traditions that we come from or that we value. I've really been pushing for students to think a lot more about bringing in their own images or video or things that they're creating. So there's I think a very tangible way for them to be thinking about these multimodal projects. But in the same course, when we're thinking about storytelling, I'll have them read the introduction of the Story, Survivance. I'm messing up that title. It's three S's and it's edited and put together by a lot of folks in the American Indian Caucus – and one of the ideas that they bring up is a question of a rhetorical sovereignty.

They say you can't really think about storytelling or you can't think a lot about what it means to look at American Indian writing without thinking about this notion of sovereignty. I think I have them read something like that and then I pair that up with... Tommy Orange is there, just a selection from that. So that's very much more literature based, but I think it's a nice way of them to be looking at some writing where this idea of rhetorical sovereignty as something that the authors are saying is very foundational to thinking about American Indian representation, and applying that and thinking that through and negotiating that.

So as much we can definitely talk about it in that way, that multicultural, that aspect of the rhetoric happening there, it's not always something I necessarily put on them to say like, "Okay, we need to make sure and we see how you're applying this, per se, to your own projects." Although, my own personal hope is that by giving them these very tangible ways of thinking about it, when they do then approach their own projects, they are still thinking about it maybe on a more personal or cultural or community level. I don't know, adding that layer of understanding that I think that they might not have come into the class with before.

So it's a lot to always say how are we going to teach multicultural rhetoric because you're including a lot of different traditions in that. I think if they can come away with at least a few bits of those kinds of ways of approaching their critical thinking and writing, that's all I can hope for.

SW: So you're talking about digital storytelling and I think that helps us see the type of work you're doing in the writing classroom, and this is something you explore in your writing and research, too. You focus on digital storytelling and using multimodal practices and methodologies to center classes on social justice issues. In "Digital Latinx Storytelling," you write, "The genre of digital testimonio is undergirded by the centrality of experiential knowledge in LatCrit scholarship that challenges the dominant narratives normalizing and dismissing the systemic oppression of people and communities of color." And then you go on to say this, "The

integration of digital testimonio into writing courses would benefit diverse student populations because the ability to write for a public audience works against the experience of feeling silenced as a so-called imposter, an affirmative action beneficiary, or a scholarship student who does not belong." How do you invite students to talk about their racialized experiences in the writing classroom, and what have you discovered to be the advantages of doing this via digital, multimodal composing as opposed to the traditional alphabetic text?

CM: I mean, I think a lot my interest in testimonials still came from alphabetic that I'd seen, but I think as I mention in that chapter, Rigoberta Menchú, on having written down what someone said orally. So I think genre, where it has that ethos of speaking the truth to power there. And so I think it does the individual perspective, thinking about this collective experience. I think when we're thinking about issues of race and ethnicity and any other kind of marginalization students may or may not have experienced, I think when they see these examples of other students talking about this in their own videos, I think they're able to see some of that collective experience that they themselves might not have thought about or recognized.

When we analyze before we start to compose own texts, I think it's a nice moment where students can say like, "Oh, I did have that experience. I was thinking about something kind of like that." So it does give them a little bit more, I think, authority, or they feel a little bit more authority to say, "Okay, I can talk about this because this is something that other folks have paid attention to." I think they still tend to have a lot of that individual experience where they'll say, "Oh, mine's still a little bit different because of this reason." I think that's what's really important or really nice too, because we're always talking about in writing things like voice and this uniqueness of voice.

I think there's an element of that that gets carried over when we're asking students, of course, to be recording their own voices as part of that practice. But I think when you're asking students, then, to bring in their own images, then I think at the same time it really makes their experiences that much more present, I think, for themselves when they're writing about. But then also for the audiences. I know that that moment of including their own archival family footage or whatever, just images they have from being kids, I think it's always kind of this moment where they're vulnerable and feeling like, "Oh man, am I really going to share this?" And then when they do, it's like watching them together in the class. That's when they're like, "Oh, man." People really, I think appreciate that.

SW: So do you explicitly link this digital testimonio assignment to social justice?

CM: Well, I'm really fortunate that at my school, since we are Jesuit institution, social justice is a part of the mission statement. So it literally is something that I think when we start talking about experience as being something that comes up, or the questions that we're asking being informed by our own experience, or thinking about things like that, I think, it's not out of place to thinking about things of like consciousness. It doesn't tend to sound like I'm speaking from out of left field. I'm really fortunate in a lot of ways that it's framed in that way.

When I'm asking students to do the digital testimonial project, they're like... I had a white male student from the Midwest, but the cool question I remember he came up with was sort of like, what are the stereotypes about them in the West that, of course, he, as someone living now in the West coast, in California, probably is much more aware of now that he's in this space where it's kind of like, "Oh, I didn't even recognize, because living there, I wouldn't assume that people in this progressive place might still maintain some of these assumptions." I think it's really nice that even someone you might consider in more of a privileged space or position, still has that opportunity to speak about that and talk through that which ideally, hopefully, makes them much more receptive to the other people when they're talking about these other issues that we might see or understand or be much more familiar with.

SW: In Racial Shorthand, you write about the importance of examining online spaces and media because "racist discourse about, and threats against, nonwhites continue to circulate in social media due to the fact that users believe they are hidden (or hooded) by cyber-anonymity." Social media can be problematic because it can be a space that reproduces white supremacy and racism. Social media can also be a space that helps provide opportunities for communities of color to share stories, circulate information, and connect for social justice purposes. Can you talk about this complex relationship between social media and social justice?

CM: So I mean, I think in the collection, I think Miriam F. Williams, I think she does the best job in thinking about the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and how that created its own sort of platform or connective space, that once folks were using the hashtag they were able to connect. I think even going back to the mind space, I was probably, and working on that years ago, I think there was a lot of hope in terms of thinking about how a lot of these social media platforms felt maybe a little more neutral, or felt just like these writing tools. I think it kind of went with that same hope at the time when, I feel like Yancey and then maybe Andrea Lunsford in *Writing Matters*, that we're writing more and writing in all these different places and students are texting, and this is great. I think in part of that message is like, no, this is good. We can leverage these platforms in a way that they can really be just like any other kind of writing in their own sort of... how we're deciding to use them.

I think that's kind of maybe the double-edged sword a little bit, but I think what was really encouraging was yes, they provided these spaces for writing and reflection, critical thinking, and then of course action. When you're thinking about it, I think a lot of people who might be isolated or feel isolated, activists in terms of rights for different groups, and then they don't feel like they're around those groups in different places, I think social media gives them that opportunity I think to connect with others so that they're not feeling necessarily. Yeah, or they can see maybe when they're gaslighted in their own communities in terms of telling people that these are issues, and other people just kind of dismissing them away.

All that's to say that I think then a couple years ago when Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression,* I think when that came out, she sort of drew attention to a lot less of the neutrality in these online spaces, sort of raising the question of why is it that we're getting these certain search

results. I think that really raised a question that, of course, as we went through the election in 2016, we started to see the influence of things like bots and realizing that these spaces weren't as maybe neutral or protected or altruistic or democratic that we thought, and how these certain algorithms rank and promote certain kinds of tweets or videos on YouTube that can very much work against, I think, social justice practices by spreading misinformation and sort of continuing the wrong dominant narratives.

I think as much as I want to still be excited about and I still use social media, we're still, we've become a lot more critical in the way that I think... which is probably good so that we're not going into it naively. Although, and I have to say that I think a lot of my students who I see now using things like Instagram, I'm really inspired by just how they are using it for their own trying to get people together or spreading information about certain causes that are happening. I think as one of those things as 40-year old person, I'm like, "Oh, this is what I hope people are using it for." It's like, I get really excited when I do have students where I'm like, "Wow, they're going beyond what I think that I myself use it for," and if I compare what they're doing to my own tweets, I'm like, "Wow, I'm just this milk toast professor person in the ivory tower." So I definitely think it continues to be... there are spaces for hope.

SW: How do you talk about ethics and ethical principles as you integrate technology in the writing classroom?

CM: I mean, I think the thing we always tend to think about the most when we're talking about technology, of course, it's always access. That's sort of the been the question for a while. Sort of saying like we have folks along the digital divide, and we also want to pay attention to other ways that people of color are using or have used technology. I think access still remains an issue of course, because we're saying all institutions are different, all content, writing contexts are very different. So of course, you want to address the access issue. I think for myself, I know I never asked students to necessarily buy any new software or have anything that they would have to spend more money on, because I do work with a lot of first-generation college students. So even though I'm at a very affluent Jesuit university, I still ask them to do things they either can do from their own laptop or have access to in the university's library.

I think those kinds of access issues are important. Also, over the summer, I'll teach courses with the Bread Loaf School of English in Santa Fe. I've done that the last few summers. And when I do that, I also have students create projects. And so it's been really good because I think a lot of the students tend to be K-12 teachers, and so a lot of them aren't thinking about technology so they might not have the most updated laptops. We've been able to find certain online tools like WeVideo and things like that, so even if they don't have a Mac, then they can still edit online. They're not restrained by a software or hardware issues.

But beyond that, one of the big things I know that's been more on my mind, is the question, of course, of intellectual property. We've been talking about it more that way, but the way we've always been talking about it as a question of just citation and attribution. So I think, something

that I've definitely encouraged students a lot more is saying, "Can we avoid using third party images?" I mean, if we do, of course, we want to cite them in the same way we do it in-text in sort of a works cited, having some kind of attribution of the photographer name or where we're getting it from on the actual image. That's I think another motivation though, when I ask students like, "Hey, let's use your own images. Let's go out there and take pictures, go take video." So that's also something that overlaps a little bit then when I'm asking them to do interviews with people, which I will do with some research projects.

So I say as a part of that we're making sure we're getting the consent from the people when we're either recording their audio or recording video. And that's something you could talk to them about and see what they're most comfortable with. I think it certainly brings up that question. We don't like to talk about the terms like "plagiarism." I think it's good to bring that up in terms of like, this is still a concern, where if we're using all of these images that we're just finding on Google, how does that not compare to if we just copied and pasted a bunch of stuff we found on Google. I think contextualizing it shows how it still parallels that traditional writing process, I think, reinforces the fact that, "Hey, we're not just doing this fun technology thing that really isn't rooted in practices that we've already been doing and values that we already have in writing."

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