

Episode 115: Daniel Lawson and Genie Giaimo

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Daniel Lawson and Genie Giaimo talk about writing center philosophies, linguistic justice and antiracism, labor and advocacy, challenges and joys of program administration, and burnout and wellness.

Daniel Lawson is an Associate Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at Central Michigan University. His work on writing centers has appeared in *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship, Praxis, The Learning Assistance Review*, and *the Journal of College Literacy and Learning*. His work on media studies, games, and comics has appeared in the *Journal of Comics and Culture and Studies in Comics* as well as in edited collections. His current research interests revolve around affect, labor, transfer, and reflection in the writing center.

Genie Nicole Giaimo is Assistant Professor and Director of the Writing Center at Middlebury College. Their current research utilizes quantitative and qualitative models to answer a range of questions about behaviors and practices in and around writing centers. Their scholarly and programmatic interest in fair and "well" workplace practices have profoundly influenced their approach to writing administration to be inclusive, intentionally anti-racist, and focused on the wellness of both workers and students. The author of over two dozen peer reviewed articles and chapters, their forthcoming book, *Unwell Writing Centers: Searching for Wellness in Neoliberal Educational Institutions and Beyond* comes out winter 2023.

Dan and Genie, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Dan, you're the writing center director at Central Michigan University. And Genie you're the writing center director at Middlebury College. Maybe you all could talk a bit about your vision and mission as writing center directors in your institutional context.

DL: CMU, Central Michigan University, not Carnegie Mellon...it's a state school about 15-16,000 students in a pretty rural location. We have a lot of first-generation college students, and we see many of our students from either rural parts of Michigan, or from large cities, such as Detroit or Chicago. So in short, we have a fairly diverse, for rural Michigan, student population. And for many of our students, their time at Central will provide their first meaningful encounters with difference. I feel that linguistic justice kind of has to be our chief frame as a writing center. So at our school, our tutors are trained through practicum and readings on social justice issues, and writing centers are the priority. It's important to me that we aren't the unwitting alibis or enablers to a white linguistic supremacy that I often worry more traditional conceptions of the writing center serve as.

In addition to training our tutors to be sensitive to issues of identity in writing, a lot of my writing across the curriculum work consists of collaborating with folks in our DEI offices to train faculty members in teaching and assessing writing. So while I draw on scholars such as Inoue, Smitherman, and others in this work, I also draw on my tutors' lived experiences and their encounters with student writers, were often subject to the after effects of white linguistic supremacy enacted through writing and grading practices around writing.

I think their testimony hits faculty members in a very different way than my presentation of other scholars work. And that's what really started my interest in testimony in particular. So, it's about outreach. If we're just focusing on students alone in a writing center context, I think we're not necessarily working on the institutional structures that often act as barriers for those students, and so we fail those writers in our mission.

GG: So Middlebury is probably the polar opposite of Dan's institution in the sense that it is a predominantly undergraduate institution in New England. It is also a very elite space, which I don't say as a good thing, although I think a lot of people probably like that about it. I came to Middlebury to work mostly with first-gen students, students of color, and other students who have been underrepresented historically at institutions like Middlebury, and I think that's part of the growing vision of SLACs, which is another acronym for Small Liberal Arts College, or selective liberal arts college, depending on which one you want to choose. That's one of their visions of broadening out who is part of this kind of institutional space.

And so my work is very much centered in that, which is not so different than Dan's...that's where we intersect a lot around linguistic justice, antiracism work, work around labor rights, and also wellness, because the kind of stress that students at a school like Middlebury are under and have been under since probably a very young age makes it sort of a pressure cooker for students around not just academic performance, but socializing and all kinds of other things. So a lot of the work that we do goes back to my research on wellness and care work, but with a very heavy bent toward antiracism work that really was started by Black feminists and Black activists during the 1960s and '70s with communal care and mutual aid, realizing that institutions don't always support people from different backgrounds and of different races and different class backgrounds.

So you sort of have to create a grassroots network to do that work. I really take that as my sort of centerpiece of the work that I do, in the sense that we don't rely on a top-down understanding of wellness or a top-down understanding of antiracism work or an institutional understanding of it, but really try to center it and situate it in community and a recognition of where this work came from. So as much as it is institutional in the sense that I reach across lots of different places, like I think I said in our email, I do WAC work and WID work. We are a small place. I hold a lot of job responsibilities that include faculty development.

My real passion is trying to create these spaces that are counter spaces to institutional narratives and rhetoric around all the good things that we want to do, but sometimes that kind of

institutionality gets in the way of. So being antiracist, being focused on wellness, being focused on climate justice and such...that's really where my work is situated in terms of research in terms of administration, and then also the way that I train my tutors.

SW: So you both mentioned commitments to linguistic justice, antiracism, social justice, and how these are embedded in your philosophy or vision and mission as writing center directors. I'm curious as to what this looks like in day-to-day practice beyond an administrative philosophy or a practicum course where you have topical readings for tutors and students. So maybe more specifically, what does this commitment look like in the writing center itself, through one-on-one consultations with students across campus and through these peer interactions between tutor and students talking about writing?

GG: Yeah, so we have a practicum, too. It's an issues and methods course that I created for this school and have taught at other institutional types. I was at an R1 before this, and before that a community college. I think the challenge is really that student tutors want more of this kind of deliberate antiracist engagement and linguistic justice engagement than the bounds of a class or the bounds of a specific professor will allow for, or sometimes even the students themselves will allow for. And so a lot of times, my work is to try to navigate the lofty goals and aspirations which peer tutors should have, because we talk about these things in our class. We talk about them in training. We talk about them through consultation, one-on-one mentorship, but unfortunately, when you are embedded in classes, which a lot of my tutors are..they are fellows, that's the model...not every professor really wants to preserve a student's voice, and that can be very troubling for tutors who see the confidence building issues, the issues of empowerment, the issues of isolation that students who have a variety of English or speak multiple Englishes that aren't considered prioritized in academic speech, in academic writing.

They come in and they know that. They know that they don't belong. And so a lot of times, what I try to encourage my tutors to do, is to act as an intermediary and then also an educator to faculty, which is a hard place to be in, but because students are so guided by this work, peer tutors, I mean, they often take on that role at first hesitatingly, but later on, as they build confidence in their own advocacy work, pretty happily. So it's a balance, but the biggest challenge that I've found isn't from the writing center side, which I think a lot of people talk about, but from the sort of institutional structures of what we think of as good writing and how to navigate that, when in fact, it isn't maybe actually good writing, because it's writing devoid of voice and identity.

SW: You're working on a collection right now called Where Have We Been? Where Are We Going?: Stories About Writing Center Labor. This book is about writing center labor advocacy and theory. Do you mind talking more about this collection, its goals, aims and vision, and what you hope it offers writing center studies and rhetoric and composition at large?

GG: So we got together talking about this a couple of years ago, I think, and actually have been circling around talking about labor in our field for many years, mainly because of all the crazy

stories we've heard, and also things we've experienced in our own journeys as writing center administrators, as academics, as human beings outside of academia. I think one of the things that we realized is that there are a lot of really fine localized ethnographic studies that take data from people about their lived experience in writing centers, which is great.

The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors is a celebrated book and people really love it. But what's less available are firsthand accounts of work and of labor and of all the things that go along with this in a writing center, or even a broader writing administrator context. I know I, for one, as I started working on my book on wellness and institutional narratives therein, sort of an occupational rhetoric look at this world that we call wellness interventions and how very neoliberal it is, a lot of our conversations around labor are, too. And there's really not this kind of spirit of activism in our field that I think we really desperately need, because our field is very exploited, and also highly, if one might argue, marginalized, because a lot of the folks that do it identify as women and are not tenured, and are on contingent contracts.

This is the kind of work that has a high turnover rate, has a high burnout rate. We're attending to that a lot in the research around emotional labor, but we're not really talking about it from a context of labor activism and labor studies, and this is an exciting, growing field, and I think that a lot of people are doing work on this and composition of rhetoric writ large. Yeah, we're just not there yet in writing center works. So we've decided that we want to kind of contextualize this, think about it from both a historiography standpoint, but also a standpoint of storying and counter storying, which is so popular again, also with Aja Martinez's work and Faison and Condon's work. It's really in the air. And yet, to actually affect this kind of work on a sort of larger scale, we need to both theorize it, but then also show it, but then also talk about what to do with it next. That's kind of the three parts. So theorizing, showing, and then now what? And if it's up to me, it would be around creating a labor model that was far more sustainable, humane and progressive than what we have right now.

DL: Genie and I became friends several years ago doing conference work together, and as we got to know one another better, we would exchange what we'd known about the field, people we knew in it, people who had left, how things had changed for certain people, and we got to realize that these stories are being lost. They're slipping through the cracks, because if you wanted to point to a writing center, it's a rather protean thing, because it can take a bunch of different shapes, forms, histories, depending on the institution whose interest it serves at that institution at a given time. And often, writing center administrators are sort of beholden to things out of their control to serve mandates that, frankly, they're not resourced for.

And so, as Genie and I were talking about this, we knew that, in these hushed conversations over cocktails at conferences or among friends at regional locations, that these stories have something to tell, but we don't value them as a field, necessarily, often chocking them up to gossip or anecdote. And the more I got involved in reading about testimony and storying and really having my eyes opened to that, it occurs to me that, was it Laura Micciche, for example, have noted that the term "gossip" can often be used as a form of punishment against women for trying to identify

and rupture patriarchal norms. And at the same time, that same gossip often serves as a way to freely circulate information about environments that are often hostile to these folk.

So we wanted to envision this work that we're doing a little differently, as collecting stories directly, rather than try to go out and treat folks as subjects and then edit their stories to fit a narrative that we're crafting. Rather, we want to get everyone to contribute stories, and then we'll write to and speak to some of them in the collection, but we're also hoping to have a database available, which is why we wanted to go through WAC Clearinghouse, that these stories would be available to anyone, other researchers. There's simply practitioners in the field that want to know what's going on in a very lived and real sense.

SW: What are some challenges and frustrations with writing center administration? And then what would you say are some of its greatest joys?

DL: I would say that the challenges and frustrations are inextricably bound up in the allocation of resources. That's always going to be the sort of dominant logic, unfortunately, of the writing center in the current neoliberal capitalist university context. But I would say those resources are both material and emotional. In terms of material resources, again, we're often tasked with mandates that exceed the resources the institution is willing to provide us. Primarily, that dictates a precarity, whether it's in terms of space, wages for tutors, institutional capital, job security for administrators. And these are common themes, both in the literature and in the sorts of informal talk we exchange whenever we gather together.

So that precarity can often lead to a heightened emotional labor, because again, conservation of resources theory, right? We only have so much of our present-ness our mindfulness to give. And so we're often balancing the interests of several community stakeholders, and those interests sometimes conflict, either with each other or with our own visions. We end up mediating. And sometimes we don't have necessarily the power or the mandate to mediate those conflicts. So there are times, for instance, when you get a well meeting faculty member who requires all three sections of the writing intensive course to go to the writing center to complete the submission. So of course, everyone shows up the night before it's due, because nobody's told them not to. They don't know, they've never been. We only have so many slots, so we can't work with everyone. They're frustrated. The professor's frustrated. We're frustrated. So often, as a director, I'm trying to facilitate some action, email exchange, "Okay. I think they've learned." And then the next semester it happens again with the same person.

So that said, those encounters or those exchanges have often led to my greatest sources of joy, where I do work with some of these profs and we establish a working relationship. Maybe they come in and do a workshop and writing in their discipline for our consultants. Maybe they stagger their deadlines or break up that class for different deadlines that we can actually see them. They coordinate with us. They actually start incorporating some really sound process pedagogy into their stuff. And when and where I can, I talk to those faculty members about how to adopt an antiracist orientation in their assessment and the teaching of writing. So that's one of

my greatest joys, is I can point to something and say, “Hey, something's different now. And it's because I had a hand in it. We had a hand in it.”

I would say the same for tutors. When you're a teacher of writing, you get to see them for maybe three or four months, and unless they're a major, that's it. They're gone. But sometimes, I've had students join us as a sophomore and then stay through their grad career. So you get the rare privilege of getting to see them in the process of becoming, and it's really humbling to see your preconceptions of them when they're a new, fresh faced tutor, versus who they are by the time they leave and how sometimes intimidating in intellect and kindness they can cultivate in those six years. To me, that is one of the most joyful experiences you can have as an administrator.

GG: I'll just echo a lot of what Dan said. I'll also just throw out there the frustration of the lack of being able to step out of the role of writing center director at most institutions, because a lot of WPA work does have a rotating approach, except for writing centers, and doing this workday in, day out, is exhausting. Doing it 24/7, on holidays and summers, at nighttime. So it's something that I didn't think about in my early career because I was just focused on getting a job. And then all of a sudden, now I'm sitting here, mid-career thinking, “Oh, okay. I have to be on my email on Sundays if something goes wrong for the drop in,” or, “I have to do this,” or, “I have to do that.” So trying to set reasonable boundaries around what is actually expected of you and your labor, because although you are an employee of an institutional program that runs perhaps 80 hours a week or whatever, you do not work 80 hours a week. You are not paid to work 80 hours a week. You cannot humanely work 80 hours a week.

So that is a frustration that is new for me that I hadn't really thought much about. And it's something that, were I in charge of all things, I'd say we should wave a wand and make a standard that says, “You should have to rotate out of writing center work every five to seven years,” just to take a break. The joy, of course, is mentoring students into doing research, for me. Watching them grow, watching them satiate their intellectual curiosity, watching them go to graduate school, which is just starting to happen for a lot of my former tutors. There is no other joy like seeing that success and that kind of pride in another student or person.

SW: Genie, as someone who studies and researches wellness, are there strategies or practices that you could offer writing center directors that are experiencing burnout right now? Where the labor and emotional exhaustion is quite frankly just too much?

GG: Yeah, that's a great question. From the standpoint of training for others, and this is useful for both WPAs training instructors, as well as writing center folks training tutors or anyone training anyone who does a lot of emotional labor, understanding their own vulnerabilities and engagement in the teaching learning process, because a lot of times tutors come out and they have these very outsized expectations of what they can affect. So really, both recognizing that you are a person outside of your work, attending to their emotional lived experience, which sounds very touchy feely, but the truth is, so much of what we do as educators is emotional. It's exhaustive because it's emotional.

I think actually having a conversation around that is useful. Perry's work on this, "Training for Triggers" is really good. I think it's in *Composition Forum*, it's a short piece, but tutors have found a lot of insight there, especially around having difficult conversations on how to navigate that feeling of being drained afterwards, or emotionally traumatized. Forget about just drained, but also really horrible stuff that could potentially happen.

And then the other thing I say from a sort of standpoint of an administrators is learning how to say no, which I think is something that a lot of people, especially in our field, just don't have any ability to do. So I recognize that that's a privilege, but it's one I have worked toward in my career, which is to say, "I can give you this writing center with 90 tutors, but what does writing center with 45 tutors who perhaps work a little bit more hours, but also are a lot happier, and I can mentor them better, what would that look like?"

So thinking about bigger isn't always better. Quantity isn't always better than quality. Quality over quantity. So a real attempt to try to pull back on the resources, because they're not forthcoming. It's kind of like a game theoretical model actually, which I have also written about. So thinking about what knowledge you have, what you know what you want, versus what the administration has, what knowledge they have and what they want. It's a negotiation.

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