Episode 134: Estee Beck
Pedagogue podcast
Transcript

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

In this episode, Estee Beck talks about critical digital literacy technology, digital media, privacy, and surveillance.

Estee Beck works as the director of the Karen Merritt Writing Program at University of California Merced with a faculty associate professor appointment in Global Arts, Media, and Writing Studies. Her research interests include ethical considerations of surveillance and privacy in writing classrooms and programs and critical digital literacy.

Estee, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I want you to think back to your educational journey. Was there a particular aha moment at Bowling Green State University or Marshall University that led you to study technology and critical digital literacy and what that means for the teaching of writing?

EB: Yeah, I have such a big smile on my face right now. There were two: one big aha moment, and then there was one after that aha moment that solidified my move to where I am now. The first one occurred at Marshall University when I was a master's student, and I had this fabulous professor, Dr. Kelli Prejean. She taught a composition pedagogy course for first year teaching assistants to get us prepared to teach our first-year writing course the next semester. And there was this project that she had us do, it was an annotated bibliography, and we had to go to Rebecca Moore Howard's bibliographies, and this is back when she had them on the web, and this is before she moved them over to Google Drive. And I saw this entry for new media. I was like, what is this new media? What is this?

I'm really curious about these two terms together. So, I went and I started looking and I saw this name that that kept on appearing over and over again: Cynthia Selfe. I was like, huh, this looks really interesting. I went to go talk to my professor about it and I was like, "I'm interested in exploring a little bit about new media for my annotated bibliography." And she said, "Oh, you have to read this book." She pulls down the edited collection *Writing New Media*, and she says, "You're going to have to read this." I read it in a weekend. I was sold. That was my aha moment. I knew that I wanted to travel down the path of studying anything to do with new media, multi-modality, digital work, and digital spaces. So then when I got to Bowling Green State University, I started thinking a lot about ethics and about representation and consent and access online.

My very first seminar paper as a doctoral student—I just want to just recall the memory from this. Here I am. I'm just absolutely terrified of having to write this very lengthy seminar paper for someone who has a very big name in the field and thinking, "Oh my goodness, I'm going to write this and it's not going to be good." I wrote the paper. I got good feedback. I made some revisions. I sent it off to a journal without really thinking of how to make the changes from a seminar paper into a journal article. Of course, it got rejected, but it got really great reviewer

feedback and I was able to take that and make substantive revisions and then got a publication out of it. But that was my second aha moment of thinking about ethics and technology and consent and access and what it means to be a teacher and a scholar and to not give up and to continue working through an intellectual problem until one is satisfied with the results.

SW: Estee, how do you define critical digital literacy and how does critical digital literacy shape your approach to teaching?

EB: Yeah, okay, so definitions are fun. They evolve with experience, knowledge, and examination. I imagine that whatever definition I'm going to put forth today on critical digital literacy will change in one, five, or ten years from now. But with that said, I'm going to put forth a definition of how I think of it now. I'm going to share a story. About five years ago, I gave a campus talk at my former institution on the topic of invisible digital literacy, surveillance, and privacy. An esteemed colleague asked if invisible digital identities played on people's narcissism. I took that question to mean that the personalization that one experiences online enacted a kind of selfishness or an entitlement for that reflection that embodies the person's desires. I wasn't quite sure how to answer that question then. It's one of those questions that has haunted me and that I continually think about because I saw bad faith in the creation of invisible digital identities due to a lack of consent, disclosure, and control. I see now that there's affect involved, there is desire, there's tragedy repulsion, there's this affect or bodily response that can't always be vocalized to digital tools and spaces of personhood and status. I still see there's bad faith in apps and owners harvesting user data, bad faith, not broadly construed, but there is some bad faith out there without explicit consent. But I also see this effective dimension that's bound to the individual. With critical digital literacy, I used to think of the term as a developed knowing of how to question and critique digital tools and spaces for power imbalances, manifestations of power.

Then due to Les Hutchinson Campos and Maria Novotny's work, I began to see a need to move beyond critique as the examination and assessment of a thing and move to a state of how to pose solutions to problems for innovation. Thus, I then began to see critical digital literacy as also figuring out how to add in more balance and equity for access and use from an end user perspective. So, I'd rather think through that. There is this underlying description of how I'm coming at this definition of critical digital literacy as consumption and production. And it's one that I'm also uncomfortable with because I think that there is a little bit more complexity within critical digital literacy than what I'm kind of giving in thought right now especially in the relationship to people and things. I do think of critical digital literacy now in a similar frame as invisible digital identities as an attendance to the effective that bound within critical digital literacy for its critique. Problem solving is an attuned awareness of an embodied experience that a person develops a sense for how to critique and how to problem solve in relation to their desires or their repulsions.

Sara Ahmed in *Happy Objects* argues that we judge something to be good or bad and how the thing affects us. Thus, I see critical digital literacy as a developed knowing and effective embodiment and response of critiquing digital spaces and objects for solutions to problems on power imbalances. For teachers in first-year writing and composition and what they ought to be paying attention to, really attends to critical digital literacy and a very deep development of the

effective dimension of how to engage with critique for solutions to problems over power, but one that's in tune to the individual and the collective. I'm going to give an example. There's a popular website dictionary.com, right? A lot of people use it. It's a really quick service to be able to get a quick definition. The website uses a lot of web trackers. If there is a person who is privacy minded, she or they might opt to do not track service on their web browser, but websites don't have to honor that "do not track" ping. So, the person might be inadvertently still tracked. For someone who's attuned to feelings of protection and security safety and maybe an uncluttered internet experience in their critique of the website and the reveal of all of the web trackers one could say, well, let's create a better website.

But one doesn't always have the tools to do this, so maybe the solution is to use a different site like the OED for definitions. For teaching, I really do go back to what Stuart Selber says are functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies, and really emphasizing critical digital literacy to students and how the things that we use in the composition and the teaching and the learning of writing may or may not align with our core values. I think it's important that faculty think about values and how students think about values and what tools they want to use that align with their values.

SW: Can you talk about a digital rhetoric centered assignment you use in a writing class and maybe explain what you hope students learn through interacting with different digital media?

EB: Yeah, so I'm going to talk about a digital rhetoric centered assignment that I use because it's really fun for students to do. We do talk about surveillance and privacy even though it's not the emphasis of the assignment, but we do talk about those things. I've used Paul Prior at all as resituated and remediating the canons and multiple classes. I want students to move beyond the classical canons, and I want them to be thinking of the remapping of the rhetorical activity, which I think aligns very well with digital spaces. And when I talk with students about this, I'm really focused on literate activity and functional systems. And I want them to be thinking about production representation, distribution, reception, people, artifacts, practices, and communities. I was reading Jason Furman's work on mobile storytelling years ago, and I've developed this project called Campus Story, so this is inspired totally by his work. The project asked students to go find a location on campus and they have to find one that speaks to them, that they find a connection to, and then they have to research an object in that space or maybe a historical happening that occurred in that space. Or they have to imagine a story like a tall tale about the location or the object in that space. Then students have to compose a story of no more than a thousand words along with images and sounds on a blog site. And then after the development of that, they have to create a very eye-catching poster with a QR code that links to the blog site, and then they have to go post the poster to the location so that people passing by can stop and scan the code to access the story. Students complete this project over six weeks and staged increments.

I'm just going to walk through that real quick. So the first stage, it really sets the stage for the assignment with an introduction to the project. The core concepts about rhetorical activity, along with terms about multi-modality, about some of the tech we're going to use, about some of the things to be aware of when using new tools and the production times that it will likely take during the second week. Students then move around campus. This is really fun. They get out of

the classroom, they get to move around campus, they get to find different sites, they get to begin researching. They might go to the library, spend some time in the archives, or they might rely upon a previous creative writing course and start thinking about a tall tale and using vivid imagery and thinking about what that might look like. And then in the third week, we really kind of get into the production part where we start talking about features or different blog sites about how to use images and sounds with creative commons licenses.

I do a demo of how to use WordPress, but I say, "You're not beholden to using WordPress, but I'm going to show you just in case." Then students get time to play with whatever tool that they decide to use. In the fourth week, students then begin composing their stories and they have these informal progress check-ins with peers on their composition development. We also discuss the reception of the story with the intended audience, just imagining who might be passing by so that as they're crafting, they're thinking about the time of day and the location and who might be going past. Then in the following week, students began formal peer review. They receive feedback, peer feedback from me, and they develop mock posters. They test them out on the campus site to see how it looks, what works, what doesn't work. That is everything from if this is an outside location, if they use paper and it rains, that's going to ruin the poster, so what do they need to do to protect it? Then in the final week, they make revisions, they develop the final poster, and then they go out and they publish their poster to the campus location. I've encouraged students in the past to maybe wait nearby their poster to see if people interact with it. Some will do that and report the people have stood and actually use their phone to scan the QR code. For the students who enjoy conversation, maybe stand near the poster. Not many people take me up on that offer, but to ask questions of people who are interacting with the story.

When I'm assessing the project, I look for a clear story at the core on a clear articulation of how that physical space and place aligned with the story, how the student represented their story through research or storytelling elements, the overall design of the blog, the poster with careful planning of content, ethical use of images and sounds with proper attribution among other things. What I want students to learn from the project is a careful attention to a production process that's recursive, having to put up with those moments of failure, and also think about audience during the creation of the project: how to represent a space in place with accuracy and research or with vivid detail, the best methods for distribution with print products, projects like large posters on campus to thinking about how to protect it with lamination if needed, how to really capture interest from people, and then how to use the space in the place to post the poster. Is it always going to be at eye level when somebody's going by, or is it going to be low to the ground, or is it going to be in some place that's really going to catch somebody's eye? And then how their practices align with the campus community values and expectations.

But then more importantly, and this goes back to Jason Furman's work, is how does connection happen on a mobile interface, especially when out and about in the world and what is lost and gained while using a phone to access information online? So, yeah, we do talk about surveillance and privacy during the project. We talk about different blog sites to use and why and the surveillance concerns. We talk about methods of web tracking, we talk about privacy protection, and we talk about privacy in terms of online spaces, but then also in real spaces. You don't want to have necessarily someone just standing there via poster and taking photos of someone else because that could feel kind of creepy. We talk about what that kind of privacy means for those

who just are in the public space and want to access something without somebody looking over their shoulder.

SW: I was hoping we could end with you talking more about privacy and surveillance. How do you talk with students about digital information and tracking? How do you define privacy and surveillance, and why should teachers in higher education be concerned with online privacy in the 21st century?

EB: Sure, so for surveillance, I rely upon sociologist David Lyon's body of work for a definition. He has this chapter on surveillance power and everyday life, and he defines surveillance as any focused attention to personal details for the purposes of influence management and control. I think that's a great definition. It's one that students can really take with them that they can recall influence management control. It's simple; it's just easy to recall. Privacy on the other hand, is more complex, complexly defined. There are legal considerations not only in the US but abroad. There's cultural context, there's social expectations, personal preferences. Here, it gets muddy when talking about this one with students. What I do is I actually go to law professor Daniel J. Solove in his taxonomy of privacy. It's a law review article and it begins with privacy isn't a concept and disarray, and nobody can articulate what it means. It's due to the number of definitions and descriptions and examples that are attached to the word. It's just such an elastic term. In the broadest sense possible, we might say that it's the right to be left alone. This comes from Warren and Brandeis in their legal article way back in the 19th century. This broad definition, the right to be left alone, doesn't really necessarily capture the nuance of when violations occur and their remedies and the cultural contexts and a historical and an ecological context of privacy. I have to walk through with students that privacy is not something that's easily defined, but we can walk away with a broad definition, the right to be left alone, knowing that we have to put an asterisk on that one. The definitions really do inform my approach to teaching both through active discussion and then mindfulness to design courses with many lessons, activities, and major assignments on both topics.

For example, if I'm teaching an undergraduate course on research methods, my focus isn't necessarily on surveillance and privacy as content. I'm really focused there on quantitative research methods, a little bit of quant methods and something that is understandable and usable for undergraduate students at the junior and senior level. But I will incorporate many lessons on surveillance with guidance on mindfulness of different website and app usage during research about data consent, about how to protect oneself from data tracking, especially if it doesn't align with one's values. But if I'm teaching a course on critical digital literacy or a digital rhetoric course, then I'll either have a themed course around surveillance and privacy, or I'll do a module or a couple modules with major assignments that focus on surveillance and privacy. When I think about what we need to be thinking about or what educators need to be thinking about here, when I think about this particular question, there's a lot of good research in just rhetoric and composition and writing studies on privacy and surveillance.

I find in my own research though, I pull scholarship more outside of the field, from communication and media studies, sociology, and legal studies. There's just more information out there in these fields. I find this interesting because the very tools that we use as writing educators that we use to communicate online, they surveil and they track us, and they leave us

with this false sense of privacy or with no privacy at all, really. What I'm worried about—and I think should be every educator's greatest concern, and this goes beyond rhetoric and composition writing studies, it goes beyond the humanities, and it moves into the sciences, and it moves into engineering and mathematics—it is really this idea of this lack of a common experience or a lack of access to the commons.

What I mean by this is that we're already seeing this hyper factionalized internet and it's politically polarized at the same time. It's so personalized, based upon the end user and the input that they put into the screen through their phone or their laptop. Where someone might pull up a page looking at all zoo animals, for example, and they would see all kinds of advertisements and they'd get this personalized experience, another person gets different content. There might be a stable article, but alongside there's different advertisements. What I get worried about is that the internet will become a place where it becomes so personalized because of all of this data that has been collected from website owners and app owners and big companies, that we're all going to start having such a radically different experience online that we're no longer going to be talking about the same things, and we're not going to find our moments of connection, and we're not going to find our moments of unity and how to work through disagreement. We already see this a bit, but I think it's going to get worse. So, my focus is for educators to draw attention to this, to students, to draw attention to the personalization that happens online because of the surveillance, and to have them to critique and to think about the very things and the tools that they use to write and to communicate, and how healthy is that for them intellectually and emotionally and physically. That's my large concern.

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