

Episode 28: Frankie Condon

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

Before we get started, I wanted to share a new feature on our site that I hope becomes a good resource for you. I created an index page that has key words/topics/concepts and where you can find those ideas in our episodes. For example, the word "race" is indexed – and you can find conversations on "race" in Episode 9, Episode 12, Episode 17, Episode 19, Episode 20, Episode 27, and this episode -- Episode 28. Or if you're interested in social justice, antiracism, language diversity, and language rights – all those words are indexed, and many more. So be sure to check that out on pedagoguepodcast.com. Again, that's pedagoguepodcast.com.

As some of you know, those key words have been at the heart of many Pedagogue episodes. As a grad student, I was lucky to land at Fresno State and work with my good friend, Asao B. Inoue, from 2012-2014 – and that was around the time *Race and Writing Assessment* was published, Asao and Mya Poe's coedited collection. So, my teaching and research has really been influenced by Asao and many others who do great work on social justice and antiracism. Asao also gave me some copies of his newest books for some of our giveaways – thanks, Asao for doing that. Be sure to follow us on Twitter and Instagram to stay in the loop. If you're out there listening and if you're ever interested in having conversations around social justice and antiracism, please feel free to reach out to me. You don't have to be on the podcast. I would just be happy to sit down and listen and chat about antiracist practices. So please let me know if you need anything, you can always fill out the contact form on our site.

In this episode, I'm joined by Frankie Condon, and we talk about centering writing classes and writing centers on antiracism, building sustainable spaces committed to language diversity, and how to incorporate class assignments that complement this kind of work.

This conversation was recorded in September 2019.

Frankie Condon is an Associate Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Waterloo. Her books include *I Hope I Join the Band: Narrative, Affiliation, and Antiracist Rhetoric*; *Performing Anti-Racist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing and Communication*, co-edited with Vershawn Ashanti Young; and *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*, co-authored. Most recently, Frankie has been the recipient of the Federation of Students Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching Award (Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance) and the Outstanding Performance Award (for excellence in teaching and scholarship) from the University of Waterloo. Frankie is a member of the newly formed APTLY OUTSPOKEN! Collective.

Frankie, thanks for joining us.

SW: You have been such a great contributor to social justice and antiracist practices and language diversity in writing studies and writing centers. I was hoping we could begin by you talking about what got you started in this work, and then maybe you could talk about how – and I'm thinking specifically how writing centers and writing classes and writing programs can build a space committed to inclusivity and diversity and antiracism? Perhaps some of us are thinking or asking the question, where do we start and how do we develop centers and classes and programs in the most sustainable way?

FC: So, I want to make the how did I get into this brief. There's a personal aspect to that part of the story that I've written about in some depth in *I Hope I Join the Band*, so I'm not going to retell that part. So what I'll say about that is that when I was in graduate school, I already had this commitment to anti-racist activism that was driven by my own family story, my personal history and my relationships. And I was going to the University at Albany. I was working with a group called the Dismantling Racism Project, and really what we were doing is anti-racism training predominantly in the medical and social services community in Albany, New York, particularly with those agencies and groups that were working with queer people of color who had HIV AIDS, and making sure that they were culturally competent, culturally aware, and coming to that work from an anti-racist perspective.

I was moving out of graduate school. I got a job directing the writing center at Siena College. I was writing my dissertation and it became increasingly clear to me that I could not proceed as an academic treating that activism work as if it was somehow unrelated to the work I was doing in the Academy. I saw the necessity for that activism, for that commitment to anti-racism in the writing center I was directing every day, in the classrooms in which I was teaching, in my conversations with colleagues, in the ways that the institutions in which I was working were arranged and who they were privileging. So I just made a commitment to myself that I was never going to behave as if my work as a writer, as a researcher, as a teacher or as a writing center director and scholar was separate from my work as an anti-racist activist.

And so that was 25 years ago or so, and I've just tried to live that way to the best of my ability. Everywhere I go in the world, this is what I believe and this is the work I try and do. So that's how I got started. Now with regard to the how do we start and how do we sustain, some of the things I think about are maybe my first gut reaction is, or gut response, is I really love the work that Myles Horton does. And Myles Horton has a phrase that I love and admire, which is he says, "We make the road by walking." And so one first response is well, how do you start? Well you just do. You just start, right? But maybe that's too fast and maybe that's too simple. So maybe you start walking in order to make the road and maybe then you ask, "Who are my people," or, "Who are our people," right? Because I think one should never do this work for others. One should always do it with others.

So who are the people with whom I can conjoin the work that I'm doing in my writing center, or that we in our writing center can conjoin with. So I look across an institution and I think, well the Multicultural Student Services Office is doing anti-racism training. Perhaps I can work with

them. And so I go visiting people. The Faculty Development Center has somebody who's doing something. So I go visiting people. Oh, I know this group of faculty are meeting and talking. I go visiting people, right? And so the job in some way is to start making connections with people, aligning with people and acting in solidarity with folks, building relationships with them. I'd say another way to begin and to make the work sustainable in a writing center is to put it at the center, so it can never be peripheral and be sustainable, right? It's not I'll add a unit to my tutor training course, or I'll slap a reading in there. It really has to be at the center of the conversation and infused into all of the work that I'm doing and tutors are doing, right?

And then the last thing I'd say about sustainability, and then I'll let you ask follow-up questions if you want to, is you get tired, right? One of the biggest challenges to sustainability I think is the wear and tear of emotional labor and intellectual labor in doing the work. And so this is part of why I say you must always do it with people. First of all, doing it for people is that weird benevolence that actually does more harm than good, right? And that often has the effect of making people, white people in particular, feel better about themselves, feel like they're a better white person without actually having any effect on systemic racism or institutional racism.

But you get tired no matter what. So back in the day when Michele Eodice, and Meg Carroll, and Beth Boquet and Anne Ellen Geller and I were working on our book together, we talked a lot about the Peloton, which if you are familiar with bike racing, you might know about the Peloton, right? So there's a racing team and one person takes the front and they take the wind so that the people coming behind can ride with less wind resistance, and then when they get tired, somebody moves up to the front and takes the wind for the rest of the people. Canadian geese do this too, right? When you see geese flying in a V formation, there's one goose taking the lead and they're taking the wind and they take the wind for the other geese until they get tired, and then they fall back and another goose takes the lead. I think we need this in activist work and in particular, in anti-racism work, right?

So no one person is at the front of the Peloton for too long and when people get tired, there's somebody who can move up to the front and take the wind. And of course, we need to be thinking about the degree to which so often people of color are put in the position of taking all the wind all the time. So there are some white people doing anti-racism work who need to be sensitive to when it's time to step up and take the wind without engaging in that illiberal benevolence, being with, not for.

SW: That's such a good answer and response, Frankie, thank you. Incredibly insightful. Being an advocate and activist and antiracist must be at the center. I like how you talked about this as a communal effort and knowing when to step up and take the wind and knowing when to come alongside, when to support. You mentioned walking the road with others – learning, listening, and engaging. I'm interested in how you do this work with students in writing classes and peer tutors at the writing center.

FC: Engagement from the center with the center, right? And also and simultaneously looking outward. I think I was just talking with students this morning about this, right? There's that turn of phrase that people will say, "Change starts by being the change you want to be in the world," right? It starts with the individual, and I tend to think that that inward turn is always necessary and always insufficient, right? And you never get to a point individually in your work on yourself where you could be like, "Dude, I'm done. I have the Purdue stamp of approval and I no longer need to work on this anymore. So now I'm ready to work on systems and institutions," right? That work is always mutually contingent and interdependent. Yeah? So we want, as individuals inside the writing center, to be thinking about who we are and what we're doing and the ways in which we are invested in racialist, racialized and racist ideologies with regard to language and teaching, and higher education or high school education, if those are the right centers that we're in, right?

We want to be thinking about what our particular institutional site is and what its complicity is, or culpability is in broader institutional systems of racism, or marginalization and exclusion. And then we want to be looking outward too with the institution as a whole. So one of the things in particular concretely that we could talk about is I want tutors to think carefully and critically about the languages for which they advocate as they're working with writers in a writing center. So when we say to a student writer, for example, "You really have to write things in this way because I'm not a racist and I like your home language and I think it's fabulous, but the teacher down the hall is a racist," then effectively we're acting as functionaries for the racist down the hall, right? So I'm not sure how that makes us not complicit.

Or we say, "Well your employers will require," right, "That you do this, that or the other thing, because they're racist, not me." We're being functionaries for racism in the business world or the professional world or whatever. And what people like Vershawn Young, and Asao Inoue, and Aja Martinez, and Elaine Richardson, Geneva Smitherman to name just a few, Victor Villanueva, are saying about the home discourses of peoples of color is those discourses are always being appropriated by predominantly white communities rhetors, right? But somehow, white folks get a pass on appropriating those discourses and all you have to do is have a black sounding name or a Chicano sounding name and you don't get the pass. So we need to think in more complex and critical ways about the languages for which we're advocating.

SW: What's the most entrenched resistance that you've experienced as a teacher-scholar who is doing antiracist work?

FC: The most entrenched resistance has seemed to me to be driven by the fear of white folks. That fear from my perspective had in large part to do with a worst-case scenario thinking. So if I do this work from my position as a writing center director, I'll get fired. Or the provost won't like me anymore. Or the teachers won't send their students to the writing center anymore. Or people won't like me anymore. This was many years ago, Beth Godbee and Moira Ozias and I did an anti-racism workshop before a Midwest Writing Centers Association conference. So they had a workshop day, like CCCC does, and we did a half day anti-racism workshop. What was really

interesting to me about that workshop was a moment when we asked participants to reflect on what prevents you from starting? What prevents you from trying?

To the best of my recollection, I think there were two women of color in that workshop and all the rest were white women. And all of the white women talked about these fears about people won't like me, my writing center's already marginalized in my institution. What if it gets more marginalized? Two women of color in the workshop talked about fears for the safety of their children, experiences with lynchings, both literal and metaphorical. So I often think that white people don't start or they resist because they're living a failure of their imagination to see a world beyond the impossible. I think that problem of what if I lose what little power I have is an extraordinary piece of resistance, right? A place where people really get stuck.

Cornel West has a wonderful...there's a wonderful essay and he's been doing over the last several years a series of YouTube videos where he talks about the difference between idealism, optimism and hope, in particular, optimism and hope. And he says optimism is the practice of saying things are really going to get better no matter how much evidence there is to the contrary. But what West says is the person or the group that has hope is the person or group that contends with the evidence of oppression, that contends every day with the evidence of racism. That's where hope lies. So maybe paradoxically a little bit, the overcoming one's own resistance or helping scaffolding so that other people can overcome their own resistance has to do with getting them into contending with the evidence that it's real, right? So that I think in some ways is where the guts of the work is, it's real and we're all in it, right? And we're all complicit. We can't write ourselves out of this story by fiat.

SW: How does this antiracist work play out in your classroom practices, say for example, your writing assignments?

FC: I'll talk about a couple of different assignments and some assessment strategies, and I'll offer the caveat that none of this is perfect, right? None of it works perfectly all the time, or I fail at it all the time, right? And so I'm just always on the quest to learn how to do it better next time. This semester, for example, I'm teaching a first-year writing class. It's an introduction to academic writing and all of the students in my class are math or computer science majors. So the first assignment that we're doing, I actually have adapted from an assignment that I found in a book called *What Makes Writing Good?* This is a really old edited collection and in this edited collection, Jim Sledd, he was an old-time compositionist, just an irascible, radical Marxist, who constantly annoyed people in his writing and in his talks at CCC and stuff because he was just fierce. And he talked about the masters of composition, right? Oh, I loved him so much. And he was very, very kind to me. So I have a soft spot.

But he included a piece in this book with permission he had taken from a friend who was teaching at Claflin College. And the assignment was to write four dialogues. Each dialogue should reveal something new about the writer, some new aspect that they would want people to know about them, right? So the first dialogue would be with a police officer, the second with a

perspective employer, the third with a best friend and the fourth with a small child. And the writing sample that Jim Sledd includes with this assignment is one that's written in African American English, or an African American English. Oftentimes, if I've used that in a writing center theory and practice course, the first response of prospective tutors is to fix and change that writing, to talk about how they would tutor that person in order to make that and to straighten up that prose, right?

But of course, that's a problem because the assignment asks the student to reveal things about themselves, right? And what this particular writing sample shows about this writer is that when confronted by the police, he is inclined to call out the racism of the police rather than capitulate to it, and to do it in a fierce kind of street way, right? And that he shifts his mode of address in talking with the perspective employer, but does so without trying to step out of who he is. He's just performing it in a different way, right? And you can see this happening in each of the dialogues that this student writer has produced, right? The first assignment for my class this semester is to write that set of dialogues for themselves.

This is a pretty diverse classroom, but it's not diverse in the sense that there are African American students in my classroom. There are African Canadian, Caribbean Canadian students, Chinese Canadian students, and so on, right? So it's diverse in a slightly different way. But my prediction is that they're going to write these dialogues and as best as they can, they're going to make them all the same and try and wipe out all of those differences in discourse that they would in fact use if they were talking to their best friend, or they were talking to a small child. So then we're going to work on putting those things back in. How do you do that thing where you recognize this is how I would actually talk to a police officer, this is how it's different than how I would talk to my best friend, and this is what those differences reveal about me that I want an audience to know of who I am, how I represent myself, who my audience is and what I want them to know and my agency in revealing or withholding?

So that's a first assignment. And then the last assignment is called the funk it up assignment. They read Vershawn Young's *Should Writer's Use They Own English?* And we investigate the debate between Young and Stanley Fish. And then they can choose one of the pieces of writing they've done throughout the term and their job is to learn how to code mesh, which of course requires that you understand how sentences work much more deeply than if you simply write correct white sentences, right? Or standard academic English sentences. You can't fake it, you have to actually learn how to do it. To write in an academic context or to write in a professional context should never mean that you leave yourself and your home language and home discourses at home. Those should come with you. The question is how to use them in ways that are fun, creative and smart.

SW: So obviously this type of work goes a lot deeper than assignments – you mentioned earlier how antiracist work has to be at the center. So I'm interested in the conversations you have with students about language and languages and languaging because I know that has to be a central part of this work in the writing classroom.

FC: It seems to me students come to my classroom having already deeply internalized the notion that in whatever ways, their home languages or home discourses diverged from what they've been taught as standard academic English, or a normative English, a white English, they are wrong. And so in order to make some determination about the use value of their work, they have to contend with that and unlearn that notion that what they have to say and how they have to say it is always inevitably wrong, and relearn how to engage with the work of writing in ways that have meaning and value to them that are useful to them, where they have agency and get to define the terms for what counts as good writing. In some way, I think that to begin with the *What Makes Writing Good?* Assignment – the dialogues, and to end with the funk it up assignment requires the in-between.

We talk about how it is that we have learned such a dysfunctional notion is that what we have to say and how we have to say it is inevitably wrong. Not only is it inevitably invariably wrong, it's wrong because we are not the people that we should be. We're not performing our subject position in a way that's dutiful and obedient. What they've been taught to think of their own writing and their agency with regard to their writing is invested with sticky stories about who they are, who they're capable of being and who they should be, that are dysfunctional maybe at best and at worst, oppressive, right?

SW: I'm reminded of your co-authored article, "Building a House for Linguistic Diversity," and here's a quote from that piece. You write, "If our fear of failure leads us to inaction, we will have failed catastrophically. If we proceed with courage as well as with an ongoing commitment to learning, we may fail, but we will learn from our failures such that we can do better next time." Building a culture, a classroom culture and a program culture and a writing center culture, that resists white supremacy, that embraces antiracism and works towards social justice is ongoing work. It's hard, but it's good, good work. Do you mind sharing a time when you looked back at something, maybe what others or even yourself at the time considered a failure, but then you said, "Hey, we can learn from this and we can do better?"

FC: In a certain way, I want to laugh not because that question is foolish, but because that moment happens every day, right? I don't think I ever get to the place where I'm like, "Ooh, I'm really good at this." But one example of a we can do better next time that I think is important with regards to the writing center world is the effort of writing center folks, both at the regional organizational level and at the international organizational level to start anti-racism or anti-oppression SIGs as part of conferences and in particular, as part of the International Writing Centers Association conference.

And so when we were first starting up the anti-racism SIG at the IWCA, the first time we met at a conference might have been Houston. It was a long time ago, and there weren't a lot of people there and we had done a lot of talking about what to do in that SIG and how to make it work. But all of us having that conversation about what to do and how to make that SIG work were white, but we were just going to try and get it started. We were just going to try and make the way by

walking, right? And so we had the SIG meeting and there was some really awesome conversation and some very weird conversation because that's what happens. And then we were done and we were like, "Well, but all we've done is talk. We've just had a yak, but we haven't actually done anything." And honestly, we spent years figuring out how to create a SIG that would actually do things, that would actually in some way impact the organization, the International Writing Centers Association, that would impact on the resources available to writing centers, tutors and directors who compose that organization.

So I don't think that work has ever ended. Every SIG meeting I've ever been to has been an, "Okay, let's try this and then see if we can keep the work going," right? And in some way, the best thing that's happened is as we've tried to make the way by walking in terms of the anti-racism SIG, more and more young people who are coming into the field, maybe they're first coming in as tutors and then they start a master's program and then they're in a PhD program and then they're directing their own writing center, but more and more young people start coming into the SIG with energy and interest in investment and ideas and all the places where those few of us who began a SIG were stuck, they could see a way through.

SW: Thank you, Frankie. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.