

Episode 76: Genevieve García de Müller

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

The purpose of Pedagogue is to promote diverse voices at various institutions and help foster community and collaboration among teachers of writing. Each episode is a conversation with a teacher (or multiple teachers) about their experiences teaching writing, their work, inspirations, assignments, assessments, successes, and challenges. Make sure to subscribe and follow Pedagogue wherever you get your podcasts. You can also find us online at

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In this episode, Genevieve García de Müller talks about her approach to teaching, how she collaborates with students to build assignment prompts and rubrics, immigration policy and civil rights rhetoric, antiracism, and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC).

Genevieve Garcia de Mueller is the Director of Writing Across the Curriculum and an assistant professor at Syracuse University. Her work focuses on writing across the curriculum, antiracism, writing program administration, and policy studies. Her publications have included the co-authored "Inviting Students to Determine for Themselves What It Means to Write Across the Disciplines," and "Race, Silence, and Writing Program Administration: A Qualitative Study of U.S. College Writing Programs." In 2020, she received an AAUW American Publication Grant for her manuscript *Shifting Landscapes: The Deliberative Rhetoric of Citizenship in U.S. Immigration Policy*. Her Antiracist WAC program received the 2021 CCCC Writing Program Certificate of Excellence Award.

Genevieve, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Let's start by talking about your teaching. What principles guide your approach to teaching? Or what values do you have as a writing teacher?

GGDM: I actually went back to the very last teaching philosophy that I wrote, which was, oh goodness, like around four years ago, I think was probably the last one that I wrote. To see whether or not, you know, four years ago Genevieve is the same as current, you know, Genevieve. What I wrote in my teaching philosophy, I'm actually going to read...it's just a sentence, but I'm going to read it. It says, "My teaching philosophy is threefold. I want to find ways for my students to care about their writing, to feel like their writing is important, and to be able to articulate their thoughts about writing." I feel like I still really care about those three things. It's idealistic in some ways, but I really do want my students to truly care and be thoughtful about the kind of writing that they do in my class.

One of the ways that I feel like I do that, or I try to at least get to that by the end of the semester is, I want them to do like a reflection of their own language practices, right? So at the beginning of the semester, we do a lot of work in thinking about our home languages, where we come from, how we're shaped, the way that we are, the community we come from, what are some like

linguistic, you know, phrases that we use that feel comfortable to us. I try to talk a lot about, like, what's something that you say at home that is comforting or something that somebody says to you at home that always gives you comfort. And why does it give you comfort? What is it about that phrase or what is it about that specific, you know, term that we use, like, you know, why do you say "soda" instead of "pop" or whatever it is? You know, do you use Spanglish at home and why is that comforting?

Or one of the things that I felt really sort of out of place when I moved here is that this is the first time that I've lived, besides my MA program I lived in England, but this is the first time in the U.S. that I've lived where the language isn't predominantly Spanish. So not hearing Spanish just out on the street or when you're interacting with people at the store or whatever was really like disorienting. So I feel like a part of my practices is talking a lot about what language does for us in terms of comforting us and helping us to feel like we're home.

So when we start the semester with those conversations, it helps us to get to a point where students do really care about what they're doing because they're thinking about like, how am I, what language am I using and why am I using it? And at what point do I need to use language that is comforting to people, but then also on the opposite end, at what point do I need to use language that's discomfoting, that pushes the boundaries, that makes people feel out of place or feel like they're being interrogated or systems feeling like they're being interrogated. Right? But I try to start with a place of care and a place of comfort.

So the next one was to feel like the writing is important. I really try very hard to choose assignments in my class that are really flexible so that students can have a lot of choice. I really, you know, am a big proponent of choice. I do a lot of co-writing prompts in my class. So students will help me write the prompt. We'll do it as a class together. So if they're writing the writing prompt, if like, you know, we're choosing whatever topic for the classes, whether it's an immigration and policy class, whether it's a border rhetoric class or whether it's even a freshman composition course, you know, we think about, okay, well, what are we asking us to do? What products do we want to create by the end of the semester, or by the end of this unit over the end of these two weeks or whatever it is. And we kind of work backwards. We write the big, major prompt together, and then we write the smaller assignments together that will lead up to the big, major prompt. I find in those ways, the more onus that the students have in the kind of writing the product that they create in the course, the more they feel like, "Oh, this is really important to me because I created criteria. I created what I'm going to do. I have a say."

The way they move throughout this class...I do that in graduate courses, to be honest. I'd like to do, you know, one-on-ones with students figuring out, well, what's the product that you feel like you can create at the end of this course and why, and how can we fit it into the reading and the theory and whatever else that we're doing in the class.

And then the last one was to be able to articulate their thoughts about writing. As we're writing the prompts, we're also writing the assessments. Students will do community-based assessments in my course. I've done a few labor contracts throughout the semester. I do things like that. I feel like through that process, they're able to do a significant amount of self-reflection and also there's like...always these other kinds of pathways that they take, not only are they self-reflecting, but

they begin to reflect on other writing, they begin to think about what is useful, what's not useful about different kinds of writing or different kinds of genres. So all of that sort of like articulating their thoughts about writing is integrate into everything that I do in the class.

SW: It seems like you create a student-centered classroom through collaboration and engagement. Can you talk more about community-building practices and how you foster engagement inside and beyond the first-year composition classroom? Maybe you could walk us through your sequence of assignments?

GGDM: I do sort of like a three-phase project. The first one is a personal narrative and discourse community analysis. They'll start with, so what I was just talking about, what comforts you, right? What language comforts you, or what sort of phrase comforts you? So they'll take something that they use commonly in their home, or at least out in their community, and they'll do a personal narrative on sort of like a trajectory of that phrase and where it comes from. What's the history of it? What's the context? When is it good to use? When can you not use it? Who do you use it with? Why do you use it with them? Who can you definitely not use it with at all? Who was not allowed to use that phrase? Are there people that you feel like if they did use that phrase, it would be inappropriate in your culture or region or geography or whatever it is?

So they do sort of that, and then they integrate that into the second part of this project, which is a discourse community analysis. So they look at specifically their community and they'll come up with sort of like a framework. And their framework is usually like, what's the context of this community? What's the history of this community? So very similar to like the first phase of the assignment, but it's more about the community in general. That sort of works into asking questions about community activism. So that project then leads into, well, what is the community, you know, what are some issues within your community that revolve either around linguistic justice or sometimes folks will choose like racial justice. Sometimes they'll choose disability justice.

It kind of depends on their community, where they're coming from. So they do this like language analysis and that moves into a more sort of material analysis, right? What is happening in terms of activists work within their community and why is this happening and where is this happening? And then how can you get involved in that? But we try to find links between the prior work, in terms of the language work that we do and what activists are doing in the community. So what do you see about like activist language that is pushing...creating a narrative for their community or fighting against, like a counter narrative, so fighting against a predominant narrative that is criminalizing them. Whatever sort of project they uptake, they actually interview members of their community.

I kind of keep this very broad because I want students to feel comfortable. So sometimes if they have a link in an activist community, they'll just find somebody that they've been working with, or they'll find like a nonprofit that they've been interested in or might want to work with later on. Or it can also be like a family member. I've had plenty of students who decided, you know, I'm going to interview my grandparents, or I'm going to interview my uncle who does this work, or I'm going to do this. So I keep it pretty broad. But they ask those questions about like, you know, what issues do you see and what are some possible solutions? What sorts of things are you

interested in within the community? So they do this sort of interview and I really encourage them to do the interview in their home language. So they don't have to feel like they have to prioritize English. So we actually use, when I do that, I use Laura Gonzales's work in my class. I have students read...we will read translation theory and we'll go through that process.

And then, the final one is usually more academic-based, you know? So we start with language analysis and the community, we go into activist analysis and community analysis of like issues that are happening in the community, and the last one is based on that data. So based on the prior work that they did, they begin to research legislation. They begin to research policies. They begin to research where they can get involved in terms of civic engagement. And they sort of...it can kind of end in two ways. They either make an argument for this kind of engagement that needs to happen, and this is what the community wants, or they can also do a real-world material project where they could write to city council, or they could put together like a workshop for their community. For example, when I was at UTRGV in south Texas, I had students who were working at Lupa, which is an organization, and they put together a know your rights workshop. Their project started with this discourse, community project, and then their final project was actually creating a bilingual workshop on rights for undocumented persons in south Texas. That was like their final project. But then I also had people who wanted to choose more of the traditional sort of academic paper. So it ended in a research paper.

I kind of give them leeway on what they want to choose. I also had people who were like creating mass letters to Congress. It's sort of like manifested in a lot of different ways, but throughout that whole thing, you know, again, it's sort of like dependent on where the class is going and what they'd like to do and what kind of product they'd like to finish with. They engage throughout all of this. Like we write the prompts for the language assignment. We write the prompts for like the interview assignment. We write interview questions together. They can always go off book, but we try to at least framework it and say, these are the kinds of questions that you should be asking. You can rephrase them if you need to, but these are like the areas that we need to be asking as a class.

Then also, you know, the end assignment, we write all that prompt together. But I noticed if like, again, if we start with interrogating our own language practices and really exploring our own language practices, students are more engaged. If we're giving them a gentle nudge to like, do the work that they already are doing, because so many students are already doing a lot of this work, but they don't see it as something that could be written about in like a freshman composition course. Right? I want their writing to actually be helpful in that kind of work they're doing out in the community. I feel like my space in the class is an area where they can practice their language skills and they can get feedback on their language skills and their writing skills. So that when they're doing the work in the community, it's more effective.

SW: You also teach courses on the rhetoric of immigration policy and civil rights. Can you talk about what it looks like to build classes around immigration policy and civil rights rhetoric? And what kinds of texts do you use?

GGDM: Yeah, I do. I teach both at the undergraduate level and also at the graduate level, I teach courses on border rhetoric and policy studies. So they really revolve around the rhetoric of policy

or the rhetoric of civil rights. And then I'll integrate things like immigration policy into that, or immigrant rights into that. I've started to use more work on disability studies. Just sort of like a range. So even though my own work is centered on immigration policy, I've sort of tried to like fold in a lot of other kind of work as well. But the courses really center on the language analysis of policy and also what leads to policy. A lot of my courses will start with, you know, reading work that was like leading up to a policy decision that was made.

So we'll start with like narratives about...I'll give you a really concrete example because I'm trying to explain the theory of it. But a concrete example is like the Dream Act, for example. So if I was going to teach like the Dream Act, we start with looking at articles that talked about the militarization of the border in the 1990s. Right. Because that's the context. We start with that. And we look at, okay, how were immigrants in the 1990s being positioned within the U.S.? Right. What is happening within the U S and how were they being articulated and identified? So that might be unit one where we start to kind of look at, well, what's the language surrounding immigration and immigrants in the 1990s. And then we kind of look...so then 9/11 happened and we'll look at the rhetoric around 9/11, because that leads us into all of those immigration choices that remain post- 9/11.

Right. That's all of that. So we start from like the identity of immigrants in the U.S., and then we move into policy choices that were made either prior or post- 9/11 and what that language and that was happening in the 1990s, how that manifests in the policy, pre and post- 9/11. Right? And then we'll move into...actually the Dream Act was just reintroduced, but it took like 12 years after for DACA to happen in 2012. We'll kind of move into public discourse. So we start with sort of like, how were immigrants being positioned in articles and academic articles in the 1990s? How did that lead to policy choices post- 9/11, and then what is happening in public discourse that leads to what we see during the Obama era, and then how do those policies then lead to Trump?

That might be like one trajectory of a semester, right? The most significant amount of work that we do has to do with just understanding how do you read policy? That's like, one of my major things. I will use Vanessa Beasley. I'll use a lot of persons that really kind of talk about how do you read policy and what does that do to you? I have this phrase, and I'm sure if my grad students listen to this, I have this phrase that I always talk about, like, how do we mitigate harm? How do we mitigate harm? Because policy doesn't actually fix anything. The only thing that you can do with policy is mitigating harm. So that's sort of like a mantra that we have in our classes, what is happening to mitigate harm and how can we do that in the most effective way?

It's an interrogation of how do we read policy? What does it do to the public? How does it create a whole identity of a population and public discourse? Then also finally, you know, usually most final projects are like historical trajectory of a specific policy reading. For example, one of my graduate students...the Department of Homeland Security manual, so detained persons at the border. There was actually the safety manual that they would use in like the detainment centers. They did an analysis of like that safety manual and how that safety manual actually dehumanizes persons within the detainment camps. Right. That's really specific policy work, but it takes a whole semester of just going through really intricate details of, how do we read this policy?

What do we do with it? How has it affected people? That leads us into like an interrogation of a really specific artifact.

SW: So your work also intersects race and writing program administration. You have a great article in WPA: Writing Program Administration called "Race, Silence, and Writing Program Administration." As the Director of the WAC Program at Syracuse, I was hoping you could share your vision for the Antiracist WAC Toolkit you developed and what that work looks like on campus.

GGDM: So yeah, it's on our website. You can go to the SU WAC website and it has an outline of our Fellows program. And it also has the toolkit that you can access. Within the tool kit, it has links to all of the articles that we used to kind of create the program. There's a lot of resources there. We also put together some activities. We put together, you know, a thing at the beginning and contextualize it. I actually just wrote a chapter in a WAC book that's coming out next year that describes like the story of how we put this together at SU. I think that the biggest thing for me was getting the support and the foundation of the program.

First, I'll talk about that. I'll talk about kind of specifics. What we do in the workshop was...I had to recruit senior faculty across campus that had some kind of buy-in with the same goals that I have. So if my goals are to create an antiracist approach to WAC, what that means is really interrogating what academic language does in all disciplines. Why we uphold white supremacist ideologies in terms of language and genre and usage. How we're replicating racist notions within our courses, in our classes and our syllabus, in our assessment practices. What are we doing to our students. A big part of this to have any kind of institutional buy-in, I had to ensure that I had, as a junior faculty member, senior faculty members who were on board with these kinds of investigations and interrogation.

Cause really what I'm asking them to do is to come to a workshop and interrogate their own practices, right. To think about what they're doing to their students and how they're doing that. It's something that is really difficult and, you know, it can be uncomfortable for faculty members. But luckily I found four faculty members, for the first round I was doing it on my own, who really had the same goals and intentions that I had. Right. So we weren't there, during the workshop series, to point the finger at anybody else. We weren't there to say racism is off campus and we're the liberal academy, right. None of that was going to happen. We had to really think about what we were doing.

So we have a CFP where we're asking faculty across campus to apply and they have to articulate to us how they're going to use WAC within their work or why they want to be in the program. They have to tell us their experience talking about race and racism within their courses. We ask them some questions about why they want to do this work. We have like a normal application process. And then when they're in the program, they go through a five-week workshop series. Three are as a group and two are one-on-one. They usually come in with a syllabus that they want to revise. They've got some prior work done for some kind of course that they teach that has like a writing-intensive aspect to it.

So when they come in, the very first thing that we do is an analysis of their syllabus. So we have them do like a genre analysis of their syllabus. We have them do like a content analysis of their syllabus, asking how are you constructing the identity of the student in your class? Who is this syllabus written to? Who would benefit who in your class? What kind of identity does the student have? Through those questions, it becomes very apparent about who and what identity their ideal student is. Even if they didn't intentionally try to write something towards a specific person, it becomes very clear to them very quickly who is going to be successful in their course and what kind of student is not going to be successful in their course.

We start there. Just really looking at their syllabus, looking at their assessment practices. We kind of take them through like a shortened version of...I use genre analysis a lot. I take them through a shortened version of like a genre analysis and what you would do. Then we also introduce them to some sort of like core concepts of WAC. Where I introduce them to work by Stacy Perryman-Clark. We have them read Natasha Jones. We have them read Laura Gonzales. They do all of this reading before they come to the first workshop. And then throughout the five weeks we go through like themes. So we'll do things like being explicit about what kind of writing you prefer in your class and why, understanding what academic genres are gatekeeping, what academic genres are going to be more inclusive.

We talk about assessment practices like community-based learning or community-based rubric building. We talk about like writing prompts and how to like create writing prompts. We also do some very traditional...like talking about exit tickets or talking about other kinds of Writing to Learn strategies. We do some of that. But throughout all five weeks they're really asking themselves those fundamental questions of, how am I upholding white supremacy? That's like the foundation of the entire program. So it was really important to get people to buy-in.

And then once I had senior faculty who had buy-in and they went through the program, we also follow them throughout the year, so they'll do the five week workshop, and then I observe them in the fall. Then I observe them in the spring. They teach twice and I observe them and give them feedback. And we continue our mentoring. I had one faculty member who used community rubric building, and they were having a really hard time getting student buy-in. They had me come in and do a workshop and then it helps to get students involved in it. You know, continuous support is really vital and important. You really can't do this work with a few workshops. I would say mentor them for at least a year. Like it should be a long process. It helps because our faculty members get compensated, they get \$3,000 for going through this program. That's another really key thing. That sort of like institutional support is really good.

SW: How do you navigate conversations around issues of racism with teachers? How would you encourage WPAs to go about having these necessary, important conversations with their own colleagues?

GGDM: I think that, for me, it was helpful when the faculty members came to these conclusions on their own. When I took them through the process of doing their own self-reflection of their materials, they began to realize that they had a very specific student in mind as they're writing their syllabus, as they're writing their assessments, as they're writing their rubrics. Who that student was. There was like a clear realization as to what they were doing. Right. Who was

benefiting and who was not benefiting from their courses. To me, I think that was the key to why people stuck with the program because they found it a revelation.

You know, we have this panel every year called re-imagining student writing, where we have our WAC fellows talk about their experiences. This year we recorded it. I'm going to put it up on the site at some point. But during that panel, I had faculty members say, I felt like...there was one faculty member who said she felt a significant amount of shame when she came to the realization of the practices that she was doing. But then she pivoted and said, but I felt supported in the program. I felt like I had actual specific strategies that I could take to revise my syllabus and my assessment practices that were going to benefit students.

I think that shift...that's the turn that always has to be made. Right? You can go through the process of feeling guilt and feeling shame, and that's normal for a lot of professors. I think any person who realizes what their actions are doing to people...but you have to also make that turn and that shift to...you know, you can't just sit in that guilt, right? You have to talk them through it and say, okay, so here's some things that are happening, but here are some strategies and some practices that you can take that will benefit your students, that will revise your syllabus, that will help you to make the kind of revisions that you need to make. The difficult conversations cannot be avoided. You're going to have people who are resistant. You're going to have people who are uncomfortable, you're going to have people...but that's a really important conversation to have. It's really important for people to be uncomfortable, to be honest. It's really, really important. As long as you also provide strategies to help them as a pathway out of that.

So that's really important as well. During the workshop, I have had a couple of times where people were very resistant to what was happening, but what was nice is that it's not just me. I have, you know, others there, I have an assistant director, I have the chair that's in there. I also have the three other fellows. Right. So, because of the conversations people have, they also self-correct each other, I would say. So that's another reason why it was really important to have senior faculty at the beginning, because they're okay with being like, well, wait a minute, you said this and you're being resistant to this. So having it be a collaborative effort, and it's not just like we're interrogating you and we're trying to. It's a collaborative effort to make everybody's work better. I found that very successful to navigate the discomfort that you might feel.

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