

Episode 110: Halcyon Lawrence and Liz Hutter

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Halcyon Lawrence and Liz Hutter talk about inclusive and accessible design, technical communication, usability, and pedagogical literacy frameworks.

Born and raised in Trinidad and Tobago, Halcyon M. Lawrence is an Associate Professor of Technical Communication and Information Design at Towson University. She has over 20 years of professional experience as a technical trainer, writer, and usability practitioner. Her research focuses on speech intelligibility, accent bias, and the design of speech interactions for voice technologies, particularly for under-represented user populations. She holds a PhD in Technical Communication from Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago.

Liz Hutter is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Dayton, where she teaches courses in technical communication and health humanities. Her scholarly interests cross multiple fields including rhetoric, health communication, disability studies, narrative, and the history of medicine and science. One of her specific projects examines the development of communication practices around lifesaving. She regularly and enthusiastically collaborates with Dr. Halcyon Lawrence on matters of technical communication pedagogy and scholarship.

Halcyon and Liz, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Halcyon, as a teacher, you are committed to inclusive and accessible design. So your approach to teaching and curriculum development focus on inclusivity and accessibility. Can you talk more about your approach to teaching and what this looks like in praxis with your students?

HL: So I think it's important to sort of set up who my students are and the kinds of classes that I teach. I teach upper-level technical and scientific writing courses and all courses in our graduate program in professional writing. At the undergraduate level, very rarely do I teach an English major. These courses that I'm teaching are what we call service courses. For those students, I think it's important to know that they often have their last set of writing instruction in the formal field, maybe one other course. So there hasn't been any formal writing instruction. They're often coming out of technical fields or STEM fields. So they're taking this course that I teach as part of a requirements, which sometimes makes them what I call hostages...part of a requirement for their degree. I think it's important to set that up.

As a result, one of the major assumptions that I find in my students is that because they are taking an English class, there are assumptions about what they're going to do in this upper-level writing class. And it's often that they're going to be writing essays. So very early and throughout these courses, I've had to keep who my students are in mind as I design the courses and what I'm

going to reinforce. What often needs to be reinforced isn't just that they aren't doing essays, but that the writing that they're going to be doing in technical and scientific writing is task-oriented. It's about somebody coming to their writing to accomplish a particular task for a particular reason. I talk about the fact that my classroom and my curriculum is inclusive, that it is about inclusive and accessible design, which is about writing that centers the reader as a user.

I worked really hard to get my students to think about readers as users. Readers...who are not themselves or not their instructor or not their peers, but readers who have a very practical task that they need to accomplish. I know for all listeners of *Pedagogue* that that might not be novel, but for our students, it is such a new idea that there's somebody who's going to act on the writing that they're doing. Somebody who's going to make a decision based on the writing that they're doing is really novel. So, all of the major exercises that I do start with an objective and lead very quickly into getting students to think about audience...writing user profiles and keeping that central to the writing that we do.

SW: Liz, let's talk about your teaching a bit. What are some of your goals in teaching technical communication or some principles that guide your pedagogy?

LH: I guess it's easy to piggyback on what Halcyon shared because there are some similarities. My context is a little bit different in that most of my technical communication courses...it is upper-level, but it's for the Health Science students or students who are in the Biological Sciences. So, like Hal, my students typically are not English majors, although my class is designated an English class and it has that designation of Eng. So, students already I think compartmentalize me in this course in a way that aligns with creative writing or we're going to read novels or write essays, which you know, through no fault of their own that has been their past experience in English. So it is a service class...this course, for my like pre-Med majors it's satisfying a required class in their curriculum, but it's also that curriculum is responding to Medical School requirements.

So Med School is saying students need an English class. This is in part how they...I think come to my class. Students who are in more of the Health Sciences, which is a different college where I am, that kind of encompasses a lot...pre-OT, pre-PT, nursing, those kinds of students. So the requirement is serving, I think a different function. Nonetheless students are in this class. I guess, that it's safe to say that they've been tasked with having this course as part of their curriculum, and they may not really understand why they're taking this, or the ways it might benefit them professionally.

In terms of principles though...because, again, like echoing Hal, my students, their most recent English class or writing class has most likely been freshman writing. And that emphasis there is on preparing them to write academically. And by that, I mean, where I talk about this with my students is they're doing analyses or comparisons, and the audience...they readily admit it's for the teacher. And for the purpose of...as they say, we want to get a good grade. When we start talking about it, the concept of a task driven form of communication is really unfamiliar to them

because they're used to writing to demonstrate knowledge or mastery. They haven't made the shift that, again, their communication is driving some decision or action. Because I teach a Writing in the Health Professions course, when I talk about technical communication, I really bring it back to someone: A patient, a caregiver, a family member. What's at stake is a decision has to be made.

And sometimes that decision might be as ordinary as deciding what foods to incorporate in a new, low sodium diet. Or at the other end of the spectrum, there's more at stake and they're making a decision about a treatment option about end-of-life care or something like that. I try to make that clear very early on as a way to kind of, again, just break them out of this understanding that you're writing for the teacher and that my presence is really more...they're not writing for me. Then the second principle tied to this...to reiterate what Halcyon shared is the concept of a user as opposed to a reader. We talk about the difference between a reader and a user, but the idea of a user, again, I think is that it's not a passive activity. There is use going on. They are making a decision. Once I frame it as patients or caregivers, it becomes a little bit more familiar, but still the level of detail over the course of the semester we get into takes some time, because of course they'll think of their father or a friend or themselves as the patient or the user. It's difficult. It takes time to kind of carve away all of those assumptions that they have and really to get to a place where they're thinking of someone other than themselves. And what's at stake in doing that.

SW: It sounds like both your pedagogies focus on the user. You both mentioned the word “user” as opposed to maybe what many of us think about in first-year writing as the reader or audience. What kinds of activities or assignments do you use that allow you to explore what it means to be a user and/or maybe in tech comm pedagogy what it means to center and focus on the concept of usability?

HL: One of the assignments that I have my upper-level writing students doing in Tech Comm, first, is to write a set of instructions. That's actually not unfamiliar to them. They write up labs and part of the process...one of the reasons they write up labs is for reproducibility. So the idea that somebody else can pick up a lab and follow their steps and get a similar outcome. That's not foreign to them. What is foreign to them is the fact that these instructions can and should be tested for reproducibility, for transparency, for accountability. As I mentioned, all of the assignments that I have them do start at the point of identifying purpose and identifying a clearly defined audience with a need. As Liz mentioned, getting them to think about why is this person picking up your set of instructions? What do they want to accomplish? Have them keep in mind their users as they write these instructions.

Then once that's done, I actually have them do usability tests. For the first time, students are getting to see somebody respond to their writing and this is not so different from peer review, where they may see their colleagues might have a reaction to an opinion about something, how they're right, they might move somebody to do something. It's often a very powerful experience. I've had students say I've never had somebody do something in response to what I have written.

It's very empowering for them. It's also very powerful in that it removes me as the instructor in terms of how I correct and train and teach because they see somebody stumble on something, or it's not clear...that's far, far more powerful than when I can see it. I can tell you that's going to be a problem, but for them to see...they have the opportunity to see somebody grapple with their writing. I think is a really powerful thing.

LH: Yeah, in my Writing for the Health Professions, I have an assignment that is to assess the usefulness, clarity, and understandability of a piece of public facing health education, or health material. Again, I don't think that's like a new or kind of innovative assignment, but what has changed for me over the several semesters...I have been designing iteratively. This assignment, I initially approached it as choose a document and let's talk about plain language and design and sort of how all of those things support the messaging of the document. They did that well, but of course the user dropped out and...at that time, talking about the user, I really had put it into the background. The user became almost just like a homework assignment, you know, so who do you imagine would be using this or reading it? What I found though, too, is what shifted is I've given more emphasis to that persona. What's become less important...what I've put less emphasis on is that document analysis. I've had to elevate what I thought was just a one-off homework assignment to sort of a major project. So now, it is creating a user persona. Which again is not a new kind of assignment.

I do have some constraints, though. The kind of research that I ask my students to do is limited cause we don't have access to patient populations. So we spend a lot of time talking about where do you...how can you learn about someone who's different from yourself when you don't have access to them directly? I actually find that very fruitful. I think it opens their eyes to see different ways that they can learn about a particular condition. I send them to like blog posts, illness blogs are very common for certain conditions, and they sort of see other persons kind of documenting maybe what it's like to live with a chronic illness. So the user persona takes on a lot more depth. We kind of move from demographic characteristics, and when it comes to health information, I also spend a lot of time...health decisions are very much informed by beliefs and attitudes. And that's also something students I think have taken for granted. Of course, everyone's going to do what the physician says, or of course, they're going to share everything up front with their physician. So part of this user persona is starting to flesh out some of those things that are less tangible, what motivates someone, what kinds of health experiences might a person have that might be influencing their hesitancy about surgery and so forth.

So as a result, this persona takes on sort of a life of its own. The other difference I would say that I found helpful for students is...I actually do the persona as a collaborative assignment. I used to have them do it individually and what was happening when I would ask them how they came up with some reflection on their development of the persona, I was getting a lot of..."I based this on my uncle or my roommate." And truthfully, I didn't see a problem with that, but in terms of my goals of a truly user centered persona, someone other than themselves, I realized that that was working against it. The collaboration I found helps them see that there is more than one way to talk about someone with a particular condition. I find that they kind of bounce ideas off of each

other. It also allows them to do more, the breadth of research I think is better. So then they come together with...I found this out or here's this, and so they sort of put together their persona collaboratively and kind of negotiating the different ways that this persona could take shape. Ultimately showing them that there isn't one type of person, like who's going to have a knee replacement surgery that they actually see that they have, "Wow, it's not just my uncle. There are all these other variables to take into account."

SW: You co-wrote a chapter called "Confronting Methodological Stasis: Re-Examining Approaches to Technical Communication Pedagogical Literacy Frameworks." That's in the edited collection Effective Teaching of Technical Communication: Theory, Practice, and Application, which won the 2022 CCCC Award for Best Original Collection of Essays in Technical or Scientific Communication. Can you talk more about what you're doing in this chapter, your purposes for writing, and what you hope teachers will take away from this?

HL: As I was listening to Liz talk, and based on the questions that you've asked us so much of what we've shared led to this research. Liz and I talk about pedagogy all the time, and we talk about the kinds of challenges that we have teaching our students to write, particularly as we described who our students are and where they're coming from. One of the things that we recognize is that we feel a kind of pressure in our upper-level writing classes to create multiply literate students that on the surface, we are asking them to do one thing, but really there are so many literacies that we require of them. And some of them, they've not received instruction that developed those literacies prior to our class. So we found ourselves teaching at different institutions, finding the same challenges, because we were always teaching this service course.

In our own research and what this chapter's trying to do is engage with critically the pedagogical literacy framework in our field and how that helps us think about our classroom, our curriculum design, our programmatic design. But how it also helps us identify exactly what we are doing in our classrooms. So the article offers a critique of the way in which the field has engaged with Kelli Cargile Cook's "layered literacies." These pedagogical frameworks Kelli worked on over 20 years ago has really sort of held its ground in the field. It has influenced many of the rules that we produce in technical and scientific communication, but there really hasn't been any critical engagement with the pedagogical framework. And that's what we were seeking to do because of the kinds of problems we were encountering in our own classrooms.

One of the things that the article does is that it offers an insight into the way in which over the last 20 years our field has been engaging with Cook's framework. So we saw after studying...looking at a number of colleagues' writings and research is that there are these patterns of engagement. One pattern, for example, is adding. Kelli Cargile Cook has established that there are basically six literacies like basic, technological, critical, social and so on. What we saw the field doing is coming alongside, recognizing that they have a new literacy that doesn't fit into these six categories. So they proposed "adding" in one. So adding was one of those patterns of engagement that we were doing as a field without really critically examining what adding does to literacy frameworks.

And so we've identified four types of patterns. We talk about adding, we talk about deepening, we talk about stacking, and checklisting...and the way that it works in our research. But we also ask our readers to consider, let's say the practice of adding a fourth, a fifth or sixth, a seventh and eighth, where does it stop? How does that make the framework bloated? How does it make the framework unsustainable? So in essence, this article is asking us to consider how we engage with the literacy framework that we currently have and how might we break what we call the methodological stasis. That in the last 20 years we really have not come up with another methodology to identify and talk about pedagogical literacy frameworks in our field.

LH: And I think where we kind of end our article or some of our takeaways is...so we've identified these engagement patterns, but the question I think is...the so what, and what happens if we don't think differently about how we engage, so we identify three characteristics of what a kind of a more responsive living pedagogical literacy framework. Characteristics it should have. And those three characteristics are responsive, so a responsive framework is one that responds or accommodates new literacies, traditional literacies, over time and also accommodates the different entry points for these literacies. This is kind of a reference to how and what started with...which is when students come to us, they're hearing about some of these literacies and I'll just...design, for example. They're coming, that's new to them.

Whereas maybe other literacies, like a research literacy, might be something that's more developed for them. So having a framework that doesn't just accommodate the different literacies, but accommodates the different developmental stages in which students are grappling with these literacies was important. Another characteristic is this multi or we used the word "multidimensional." So, what was important in Cargile Cook's framework was this "layeredness." But in keeping with I think a more responsive framework, what we see is that layeredness actually is more of an interdependence. And so again, as a way of breaking from patterns of stacking or adding, a framework that demonstrates or recognizes how these literacies are interdependent. And that it's not necessarily sequential or they're not discreet that they are coexisting or co-developing in many cases.

And then the third characteristic we identify as just sustainability. I think Hal kind of referenced this. Sustainable, of course, is ensuring that the framework not just that it continues to grow, but it's useful. And it's relevant. As in keeping with the field's growth and development and all of the new things that is happening. So those three characteristics is kind of one of our conclusions. I guess a recommendation as to break out of this stasis. What might a pedagogical literacy framework demonstrate beyond that then? Just our takeaways we frame as questions. Because we don't have...we're not suggesting what the framework is, but more so our takeaway is to kind of ignite or spur engagement of the field.

So we pose questions as a way of doing that. A couple of our questions then we ask: Is a single framework necessary? Or would multiple frameworks be preferable? And if the field did have multiple frameworks, would this be an asset for our field's identity? Or where would it take away from our identity as a field? A second question, which I know Hal and I, we think is very

provocative is this: Who, and by what mechanism does our field determine these literacies for technical communication? And then a third question that we ask: Can or should our framework account for a hierarchy of literacies? Again, no answers, but hopefully, provocation questions for others to pick up.

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