

Episode 27: Iris D. Ruiz

Transcript

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

Before we get started, I wanted to share some good news. Pedagogue won the 2019 Computers and Composition Michelle Kendrick Outstanding Digital Production/Scholarship Award. And I am incredibly thankful and honored – I shared a cheezy story on Twitter, if you don't follow us, our handle is [@ Pedagogue](#) . That's where we post news, updates, and we do book giveaways, so be sure to click that follow button so you can stay connected. Anyway, on the last day of kindergarten, my teacher asked me what I learned that year, and I told her to make friends. The other kids laughed, but I was serious. Somewhat surprised she said, "Well, Shane, what do you want to learn or do in first grade." I said, "To make more friends."

I've always been that kind of person, drawn to community and people, stories, relationships. And really, that was one of the things that led me to Pedagogue. I could sit and listen and talk with people. This has always been a podcast about other people, about facilitating conversations across institution and positions. All of that to say – this award, to me, is about you. So thank you. Thanks for – this is going to sound cheezy again – for being my friend and making this thing possible.

Now, to the episode. In this episode, I talk with Iris D. Ruiz about Chicax studies and ethnic studies, examining histories and embracing diversity and inclusivity, decolonial theory and antiracist practices. Dr. Iris D. Ruiz is a Continuing Lecturer for the UC Merced Merritt Writing Program and a Lecturer with the Sonoma State University Chicano/Latino Studies Program. Her current publications are her monograph, *Reclaiming Composition for Chicano/as and other Ethnic Minorities: A Critical History and Pedagogy*, and a co-edited collection, *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies: New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy*, in which she also contributed a chapter on the keyword "Race." She's also written several articles and chapters for edited collections. Her 2017 coauthored article deals with race and WPA history, and was published in the *CWPA Journal* and received the 2019 Kenneth Bruffee award. This work is also currently contracted with Parlor Press for a forthcoming book. She has recently launched a podcast, which is a collaboration between Spark and Writing and Working for Change Series and Scholars in Rhetoric and Writing in an effort to create resilient strategies.

Iris, thanks for joining us.

SW: I want to start by talking more broadly before we get into decolonial theory and antiracist practices, about your pedagogy, specifically how Chicax studies and ethnic studies informs your teaching.

IR: When I look at my pedagogical practice, it's definitely grounded within the studies that I've done within my research, within a certain theoretical framework. And so if you're familiar with

my first monograph, it really was a bridge from thinking about how we would teach linguistic and culturally minoritized students within the classroom, to looking at a specific pedagogical approach that would actually be beneficial, not only for racial minorities, but also for white students and thinking about the ways that a critical pedagogical approach can get them to see the different experiences of different peoples within the United States. And then also thinking about how that might build on my current work with decolonial practice and thinking about how to decolonize the classroom really also relates to that. I try to think of my pedagogical approach as being a very organic outgrowth of the things that I research and the things that I care about.

And then, so obviously being from California and specifically within the Central Valley, there's a large Latino/Latinx population here. The reason why I really, really value the knowledge offered by Chicana studies and ethnic studies courses is because it's very much grounded within the community and communities in which I work, are Hispanic serving institutions. However, my pedagogical approach tries to take into account everyone.

A little bit more specific to your question about how that finds its way within my pedagogical practice, well, I think first of all, we have to think about the level of which we're teaching. And so I teach first-year composition. I teach both renditions of that, the basic writing section, but also the research-oriented section. And then I teach upper level classes as well. In those classes, we concentrate a little bit more on genre, but I definitely make sure to bring in the ethnic studies approach.

The most common and probably the most repeated rendition of how I envision a pedagogical approach to be, especially within first-year composition, really relies on bringing in that communal approach, which means looking at the histories of communities and then for the students to be able to learn how they situate themselves within those histories, especially when those histories have not been taught in the K-12 institutions. And so when we're thinking about ethnic studies and the fight for ethnic studies, the reason why I have an ethnic studies focus, and I think that it's very important in this area, is because students are not exposed to it unless they actually go to college. Many of them it's their first actual encounter with some of the histories that come into our pedagogy through the readings. They're not familiar with these histories and many of those histories are tied to their own identities.

And so again, going back to the philosophy of ethnic studies and Chicana studies is very much centered upon self-empowerment, learning about their own critical history, is that it does lead to a form of self-empowerment. And not to mention through all of this, where I want to end up here, is that we're teaching writing and so we have this goal and this skill to teach. So what are we going to utilize as the material as the approach or goal of that particular pedagogical approach? And how is that going to be expressed through their writing and the different artifacts of writing that they have throughout any given term? I definitely believe in the power of writing, too, to be able to write oneself out of an oppressive circumstance or situation. And that's also very much strongly rooted within ethnic studies and Chicana studies.

SW: You're talking about using writing to explore histories, including oppressive histories. And you're talking about framing teaching writing as an opportunity to value multiculturalism and embrace diversity and inclusivity. Can you talk more about the classroom practices you use and how you've seen your students' literacy grow through this approach to teaching writing?

IR: There are various renditions of how this could take place in any given classroom or term. The one that I wrote about specifically as a case study within the book is one class that I taught actually at UC San Diego in 2006. And in that particular class, it became very important for me to bring an essential question to the students there. It became really important for me informed by my own critical study of history, to really examine the purpose and function of history. And it was really that kind of disciplinary question or that origin disciplinary question of what is the purpose of history? What is the function of history? And many times when we approach a writing class, we do have an essential question that we would like students to be able to consider. The same time, we also have to consider the limited experiences of 18 year-olds who hadn't necessarily been exposed to maybe a metacognitive understanding of a purpose of history or purpose of a discipline.

So I wanted to be able to get them to hone that particular skill, just to think about why do we have to take history classes in K-12? More likely in high school, we all have to have that historical requirement. So I get them to try to reflect upon, what is the whole purpose of history? What does it allow us to express? And how does it influence our identity? The whole first half of the class, and so I was on the quarter system at that time so we're talking about nine or ten weeks. Probably about the whole first four to five weeks of the classes, we're really delving into the purpose and function of history from various perspectives. One of the things that the book touches on is critical race theory as a framework.

If we're thinking about various different perspectives, we're going to consider the mainstream perspective, but we're also going to consider a critical race theory perspective, we're considering alternative perspectives about the function of history. Many of us are also taught in the Francophone tradition. We are also privy to the fact that discourses create discipline so if we're trying to get students to understand how that takes place, then we want to share some of that knowledge with them. We ask, how do we consider it from a non-Western perspective? What if we even learn about what the word Eurocentric means? A lot of students don't even know what that word means. And then looking at how mainstream scholars within the discipline of history define their own function.

These are the types of readings that I bring in from academic journals, Omi and Winant's *Racial Formations*. It gets them to understand the histories of colonialism. It's a preview to why is colonialism even important in this particular instance? What's the history? What's the relationship between history and colonialism? That's the first half of the class. Then, the second half of the class, I have to say for any teacher who's interested in implementing this particular pedagogy in their first-year composition course, the second half of the class can pretty much be any historical story that you choose that you'd want to focus on. As long as it has the ability to be

approached from a Howard Zinn's perspective, *The People's History of the United States*, having various versions of historical moments. So the way that I've seen their literacy grow, is they just start to question things. They literally just start, you can see in their eyes and you can see it in their work and how they're examining text more critically. You can see who's been exposed to this information and who hasn't. But you can see a growing greater literacy in the purpose and function of history. And you can see the growing literacy in the area of that particular historical story.

SW: Your research also focuses on decolonial theory and program administration. Can you talk more about that?

IR: That's an interesting, also challenging question. It's not something I necessarily have thought of a whole lot. Probably maybe the last two years I've been thinking about the role of decolonial theory in administration, because when we're thinking about administration, that's already a colonial construct in terms of just the way, just all of the ideas and concepts that it invokes and the practices that administration invokes is to regulate. And so, we have to think about how that type of regulation or approach to regulation centers on a top down approach or on a more of a communal approach or collaborative approach and the ways in which that program values the various voices of the educators that they're working alongside with and what do they value? What is their program's assessment built upon? What is the verbiage or the checks used within writing programs, course learning outcomes or program learning outcomes? What kinds of skills are they valuing of their educators? But also what kinds of skills are they trying to impart and put value on that we're teaching our students? And how do those affect and apply to the student?

That is for me, a decolonial practice. It's going to ask you to think about your own power position. And it's going to ask you to think about how do you empathize with your potentially marginalized faculty or your first-generation minoritized students as well? How are you going to be able to train your faculty and give them the ability to be able to value a diversity approach if you yourself don't value that? And so all of those questions and those reflections are very decolonial in the sense that, one of the actions, I would say that really resonates with decolonial practice is self-reflection. Thinking about oneself in the world. Thinking about how others are a reflection of yourself. Thinking about the ways that you act upon the world and the way that the world then responds to you is a very type of decolonial consciousness, I guess, state of mind.

If one does not have that experience or foresight or just worldview, then they might have more of a top down approach to where we're not considering who our educators are. We're not considering who our students are. We're just considering we need to have these course learning outcomes met and these learning outcomes met. That's all we need to worry about. And to me, that's a recipe for failure because as we know, the demographics all over our country are changing and they're changing in a way that challenges that older structure that we could possibly call a symptom of settler, colonial structures within the university.

SW: I want to talk about antiracist practices, specifically in relationship to writing programs and larger structures that guide our writing classes. Because we can talk about antiracist pedagogies and practices and that might come up here in your answer, but I'm thinking about how we have to change our systems. We have to change our practices. We have to change our structures. Of course, we can look at it through the lens of assessment, but that's just one lens. Another lens is through administration and programs. I want to set this question up by encouraging everyone to read your coauthored article, "Race, Silence and Writing Program Administration: A Qualitative Study of US College Writing Programs," for more context and information. In it, you talk about the under representation of teacher-scholars of color in writing studies and the silencing of teacher-scholars of color. What future direction can we take as teacher-scholars to amplify antiracist initiatives and aims and to intersect race and administration so that we can resist white supremacy?

IR: I don't know if I could speak so much to scholarship as I would actually just speak to practice because as I had mentioned earlier with my pedagogies, I really want it to be able to be implemented and for people to be able to take action based upon our research. And I really was shocked in some ways with some of the responses that we had in our interviews, because I understand that there are writing programs who are really struggling with how to implement antiracist measures in their programs. And so thank you for that question. Locally, I would say for about the past two years, we've created what is called a diversity initiatives committee that is headed by a diversity initiatives chair. It's not necessarily only comprised of faculty of color because as a matter of fact, we have very few faculty of color in our writing program. It's comprised of who's ever interested in contributing to this particular conversation about diversity, about what it means, about the mission of the program.

It does call for a commitment to creating structures, but also the commitment to being able to be open, to revising current structures and to be able to understand the necessity of committing oneself in terms of your time and your labor, to the practice of restructuring or revising a current program to value diversity. Actually bringing into the center, the value and meaning of diversity and being able to have programmatic conversations about what does that mean to every individual? And why are some definitions proliferating more so than others? And in which way is the department or program lacking in their understanding of diversity? And so once we start, once you start getting those conversations taking place, then you start opening the doors for looking at deficiencies, possible deficiencies, or just possible places to grow within your program that are maybe your weak link right now, as far as diversity awareness.

And, we want to make sure that we understand that in our article we mentioned that diversity is definitely one of those kind of stand along metatypical words that tries to bring up the issues of race, but it doesn't necessarily go far enough. Some people are not ready to talk about race. They're not ready to talk about antiracism right off the bat. We get into those conversations in discussing diversity and then we can talk a little bit more about what race means and how we're valuing the race of our students, our own racial histories within the United States, our complicities and some acts of bias. It kind of opens up the door to be able to talk about these

things. And then, it branches off into various areas. We branched off into bringing in a new mission statement for our writing program that values the students' diversity. And then we branched into discussions of course learning outcomes and how we could also revise those to reflect more of a commitment to diversity. And so those are just a couple of suggestions of how you take what we studied and what we learned about some of the misgivings or the misunderstandings about the role of race and diversity in writing programs, take some of our findings and try to put those within practice in your own institutions.

SW: This question is on NCTE's position statement "In Support of Ethnic Studies Initiatives in K-12 Curricula." You were the lead author on this statement and you told me that this was one of the best experiences in your career because it was one of the first items you contributed to the Latinx Caucus. I'm curious about the implementation of this curriculum in K-12 settings and how this can be incorporated in secondary classes?

IR: Well, I think as far as the implementation of ethnic studies within the K-12 curriculum and the way that that can be further supported, is we do have specific members that, going back to the Caucus that are working in this area, especially now to make concrete resources for K-12 in terms of how to diversify the curriculum. Especially if we're working within a common core tradition or common core requirements in our state. How does it look to bring ethnic studies curriculum in? That happens at various levels. It can happen on an independent level. It can happen on a school district level and it can happen on a state level. So I guess the one big, really important reference point that we have right now in terms of the effects and the benefits of having ethnic studies within K-12 curriculum, probably would be the 2008-2009 story about the implementation of a Mexican American Studies program in Tucson Arizona, in a Tucson Arizona unified school district.

The reasons why studies came out about that particular program was because it was actually banned. And when the program was banned, we had some sociologists, some social scientists try to go back and collect data about the student outcomes, the student progress, their grades, their assessment, their attendance, also their college-going behavior. We had some people going back committed to being able to revive that program after it was closed by the school board, come out with some really interesting results. And that PDF I think is available. You can Google it, the academic success measures ethnic studies, it's written by Christine Sleeter, she's a sociologist.

In that particular report, it came out that students that were involved in the Mexican American Studies program, they did achieve higher on their test scores. They did exhibit higher rates of attendance and they did exhibit higher GPAs. And then they also exhibited a higher tendency to go on to college. Many of them actually did go on to college. And as a matter of fact, it's interesting that you asked me this because just last semester I was at UC San Diego and I ran into one of the students who was part of that Tucson unified school district Mexican American Studies program. She's now in the ethnic studies PhD program at UCSD, studying some things about African American women and her focus is very much ethnic studies, giving credit to that particular program.

And so, the evidence of the benefits of ethnic studies for all student populations, I believe can be found there in terms of the cradle, but we can also see the struggles coming before. And as far as how it's moving, so if we think that happened, started happening around 2008, now we're in 2020 and we can see school district by school district wanting to implement an ethnic studies, at least an elective, but if not a requirement within the school curricula. Some whole states have taken this on.

California is actually considering a deal right now. There's also, there's challenges that come through with agreeing on what needs to be in this curriculum, but there's pretty much, I believe there's growing agreement about the inclusion of ethnic studies curricula in the classroom. And so then this, going back to the statement is at the very end of that statement, I'm very thankful that I was able to work with Dr. Christina Cedillo and Dr. Alexandra Hidalgo who helped us, was definitely a collaborative effort in bringing in resources that actually are in the end of that particular statement. There's I think at least two or three pages worth of resources for how to integrate in the K-12 curriculum.

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