Episode 108: Kaitlin Clinnin
Pedagogue podcast
Transcript

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

In this episode, Kaitlin Clinnin talks about gun violence and trauma, emotional labor and writing program administration, crisis management and response, trauma-informed pedagogy, and technology.

Kaitlin Clinnin is an Assistant (soon-to-be Associate) Professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where she directs the first-year writing program. She researches how writing instructors and writing program administrators can create effective learning environments for students given changing social and educational contexts. Dr. Clinnin's most recent research focuses on trauma-informed pedagogy in writing programs and classrooms. Her work has been published in *Computers & Composition*, *Composition Studies*, *Communications in Information Literacy*, *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, and several edited collections including most recently *The Things We Carry: Strategies for Recognizing and Negotiating Emotional Labor in Writing Program Administration*.

Kaitlin, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You're a WPA (Writing Program Administrator) at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). You recently published an article in the journal WPA called "In the Event of an Emergency: Crisis Management for WPAs." You also have a chapter in the co-edited collection, The Things We Carry, on the emotional labor of WPAs. Can you talk more about this research on trauma and responding to crisis and the emotional labor of writing program administration? Maybe you could share what you are discovering and learning as a WPA about crisis management and response and what that means for supporting teachers?

KC: Well, and thanks so much for this question and for the opportunity to talk about this work. Unfortunately, my research interest in crisis and trauma is so relevant now. I really wish it weren't so relevant, but I would also say that trauma and crisis have been relevant for a long time, we just haven't necessarily recognized it as such, or we would recognize it on an individual student basis, and we hadn't considered about the actual structures and how many students, faculty, and staff were affected by trauma and crisis within our classroom and our writing programs.

So, just to start a little bit maybe with how I got into this work, because it's not what you go into grad school wanting to write about, or at least I definitely didn't. I started working at UNLV in July 2017. I was a brand new WPA, brand new assistant professor jumping into leading a very large writing program. My first responsibility was training our 25 new graduate teaching assistants to prepare them for the classroom one week later. I distinctly remember, as a little bit

of foreshadowing, during our orientation, a new GTA asked me what to do if there was a shooting on campus, and I didn't have a great answer for them. I was brand new to the campus. I didn't know the policies, the procedures, or resources that existed, and all of that is so institutionally specific. Instead, I tried to make them feel better about their anxiety, about going into the classroom because that's, to me, what it was. They were worried about going into the classroom and they're worried about the what-ifs.

I told them my story as a way to try to make them feel better. I told them that I'm from Newtown, Connecticut, which is now most famously known as a mass shooting at an elementary school. I did my graduate work, my master's at Virginia Tech, and although I wasn't there during the shooting, I was there a few years later and that really colored my professional life, like I learned to teach at Virginia Tech in the shadow of this mass shooting. And then at every single institution where I have taught or learned, I have been in a lockdown for a gun violence situation on campus. So the presence of violence in educational settings has always been a part of my professional life and education. So what I told that student was this has been my experience, but it is unlikely to happen to you. There's a little bit of ironic foreshadowing for you. Because two months later on October 1st, there was a mass shooting on the Las Vegas strip. The 1 October shooting, which up until today has been the largest mass shooting in United States.

So that happened, and all of a sudden, I'm a brand new WPA at an institution that I don't really know. I'm trying to coordinate a very large writing program that was filled with 5,000 undergraduate students, about a hundred graduate teaching assistants, and about 50 to 75 part-time instructors who were all directly or indirectly affected in different ways. They had lots of feelings and lots of questions, and there were not a lot of answers. I was also experiencing my own reaction, which at the time, I didn't know, but I have since been diagnosed with PTSD from gun violence because of my previous experiences. So it was like this confluence of terrible things that had been happening. And there were lots of questions about where are our students? Do I have to get in touch with them? Where are our faculty? How do we get in touch with all of our faculty who are teaching for us? What are we doing about students who have been affected, who might be hospitalized, who might be working extra because they work. I had a student that semester who worked in the Las Vegas morgue.

And it wasn't just like the immediate effect on October 2nd. It was, how has this experience, like it's continuing even today. We're still dealing with the repercussions of that shooting. And so as a WPA, I was looking to our institutional guidance and I wasn't getting a lot of it because I don't think anybody really knew how to respond to it. And so I found myself responding and doing a lot of emotional labor to try to allay some of the fears that our faculty and our students had, trying to come up with curriculum and programmatic adjustments, because it was coming up on midterms. We were coming up on major deadlines, and so telling instructors to extend deadlines, like here's how you can rearrange your course, here's a script for how to return to class, because you might not have held class the day after or even that week. But then how do you go back to class recognizing this thing that happened has affected so many people but in a variety of ways. Because you might have a student in your class who did lose somebody that night, or is a first

responder and has been working extra. But you also might have a student who they're not from Las Vegas. They don't have any connection to this. It's something tragic that happened, but it hasn't directly impacted them. So that was kind of the work that I found myself having to do. And it was the work that I had no preparation to do.

I had some preparation because I had experienced similar situations unfortunately before. And I think that also made me more empathetic to what our instructors were feeling, and anticipating what they were feeling, what our students might be feeling. But in my WPA seminars in grad school, in my previous WPA experience as a grad student, I never had to think about how do you respond to a mass shooting? And we were just really fortunate that it didn't happen on our campus. It was a local event that had direct impact, but it didn't directly affect us in the same way. And so this really showed me that as WPAs we're constantly talking about how we're responding to crisis. You know, there's a budget crisis, there's a scheduling crisis. Like we go around crisis a lot because we are dealing with often people's livelihoods, like their economic factors, their student learning. There are a lot of high-pressure concerns, but then you have like a real crisis that happens. You might have prepared for a budget crisis before, but you haven't prepared probably for something that is a large-scale crisis, like a mass shooting, or a pandemic that goes on for two years.

We don't have preparation for this work practically or emotionally. I saw a gap there, and that was the gap that I didn't want anybody else to ever have to experience. So my work up until this point has really been on making visible the work that we were already doing as WPAs to manage crisis. Unfortunately, mass shootings are fairly common. And so there have been a lot of WPAs who have been tangential to them, like in their community, or they've happened on their campus. So WPAs have had to individually kind of come up with those resources and figure out how their programs are going to respond to that. Probably for good reason, probably because of the trauma, the PTSD, just like the emotional work that goes into that, there weren't that many national level conversations that I was able to find about that.

I did talk to several WPAs who sent me scripts from when something happen similar to them. But I didn't find that there was an easily findable online resource that I could go to, because obviously as an academic, my first response was how do I research this? Where's the resource for this? And there wasn't one. I've been working on trying to make visible this labor and articulating the kinds of labor that are in this. There's the practical labor. There's the administrative labor. But then there's also the emotional labor of it. So I have a piece in the edited collection, *The Things We Carry*, where I talk about the emotional labor of crisis response, how as a writing program administrator, you are responding on behalf of the institution. You are expected to keep calm, cool, collected, direct people to resources while you're also experiencing the same situation yourself or a different situation. You know, my situation responding to the 1 October shooting was compounded by the fact that I had undiagnosed PTSD at the time from other gun violence situations.

And I was a brand new WPA and tenure track faculty member. I felt like this was a defining moment of how I was going to be effective in my role two months into my role. So it felt like the stakes were even higher because of that. So recognizing that emotional labor, and like the vulnerability of that position.

Then the most recent piece in *WPA* is fairly pragmatic. It is the piece that I wanted on October 2nd to find out how I could have anticipated, prepared for, and recovered from crises that affect the writing program. So with that piece, I do offer online a template that folks can use to create their own crisis management plan. And when I'm talking about crisis management, it's not just something happened and now I have to respond to it. But ideally crisis management is something that we are proactively thinking about, we're preparing for, we're trying to prevent what we can. Then we are responding when something does happen and recovering over a period of time. It involves kind of thinking about the what-ifs. What are the things that could happen in this writing program? Are there ways that we can prevent them? A lot of times with writing program crises, we can't really prevent these crises from happening, but are there things that we can do to prepare, like offer professional development to our instructors about the policies and procedures around different sort of events that might happen on campus? Like a public safety concern, if there is a fire, a hurricane, how do we get that information to our faculty and staff, and then out to our students? Who do we need to communicate to? When do we need to communicate with them? How often? Who else at the institution am I opposed to be communicating with? What are those chains of command?

Trying to make it as easy as possible for the WPA or for any administrators to then respond, so that you're taking some of that practical administrative labor off of your plate at a time when you're also going through whatever the crisis is. And then thinking about longer term recovery, because it's not just that incident. It's going back to the classroom after the hurricane happens and your students are still displaced. Your faculty might still not have running water, electricity, food at home. How do you continue to teach under those conditions? And knowing that it's not going to go back to the way it was before that crisis happened, but how do we adjust our expectations for this class the rest of this semester? How do we move forward and what is our long-term recovery goals?

SW: I'm thinking about what this trauma-informed practice looks like in the classroom. So you talked about questions WPAs might proactively consider when it comes to crisis management, and now I'm thinking about classroom teachers working with students after tragedies. Can you talk about what trauma-informed pedagogy looks like, and maybe how this approach complements other pedagogical goals and values in writing studies?

KC: Yeah, so I think that trauma-informed pedagogy really overlaps with other commitments that I have as an instructor, and that I think are more common in the field now. Those are commitments to anti-racist, culturally sustaining, and accessible pedagogies. I think they all complement each other. And adding in that attention to trauma also creates a more hospitable environment for each student to feel safe, recognized, and empowered in the classroom.

I think that that feeling is fundamental to learning. We can't ignore, for example, the fact that education schools and colleges have been a site of trauma for many groups and individuals. We don't want our classrooms to exacerbate existing traumas or perpetuate new traumas. So as a trauma- informed instructor, who is also thinking about anti-racism, accessibility, and being culturally sustaining, I am very conscious of what my curriculum, what my classroom looks like, what my assessment looks like. So thinking about whose voices are represented in the curriculum? How are those voices represented? How am I creating a classroom environment where students are being encouraged, where they're encouraged to be engaged in the many forms that engagement takes as opposed to being penalized for not showing up, or for not being engaged in the way that I think that they need to be engaged. And a lot of times that supposed lack of engagement is due to factors outside of the student's control.

How are student writers empowered to make the classroom their own and to achieve their goals for their education? How are they able to express their ideas in as many ways as possible? And then how am I assessing their writing in a way that is validating and constructive as opposed to doing more harm? For me, it's always about recognizing the human element of teaching and learning, and trying to provide as much opportunity for students to succeed, and giving them the grace to help them overcome whatever challenges that they have going on. So this has always been my pedagogical philosophy. But since March 2020, I've said that this has been a programmatic policy. Like this is a programmatic imperative. Some of the ways that I've started to do this trauma-informed pedagogy is I've started to use contract grading, or a form of it. I've eliminated our programmatic attendance policy, which had been previously incredibly punitive, and we got rid of that before the pandemic happened.

We want students to learn. We want students to come to our class. I would rather a student be in my class once every few weeks than never at all. I don't want to penalize them. I want to invite them into the class, and to try to figure out what's going on with them. And just in general, I think I've really let go of the ideas about what it is that I am supposed to teach, or what students are supposed to do. And to try to just be present with the writers and the teachers and my classes to figure out what they need and want, and trying to create an environment where they can do that. I think that's something relatively simple that pretty much any instructor can do, is to learn about the resources that are available to their students on campus and in their local community. I've created for our writing program just a one page handout that we've now included in all of our campus shells. We make it fairly available to our students. It lists all of the resources that they have available to them. Like if they need emergency funding, if they need access to the food pantry on campus, if they're dealing with housing insecurity, here's the email, here's like a little description of what this is. If you are dealing with sexual assault, or anything.

Compiling all those resources for them in a one-page document. And for our instructors, we've actually made a separate page document as well that has resources for what to do if a student discloses that they're going to self-harm. We've added all of those resources and put them in all of our grad student and part-time instructor cubicles. For a lot of writing instructors, they feel

very disconnected from the larger institution because they might be new graduate students. They aren't as plugged in, or they're part-time instructors who for a variety of reasons have been held at arms length from the institution.

So as a writing program administrator, compiling those resources for your instructors helps them, helps students more. As an instructor yourself then you also become aware of the resources and feel better equipped to have some of these really challenging conversations with students who are very likely to disclose to you because you're the only faculty member who knows their name.

SW: Kaitlin, your teaching and research interests also include digital media and technology. Do you see intersections between writing program administration and technology, especially in relation to crisis management and trauma?

KC: I think technology, it does have two sides to it. On the one hand, it has allowed us to remain connected even as we are socially distanced. And at the same time, that connection has led to a sense of normalcy, like continuing in the face of great adversity. Just because we can continue doesn't mean that we necessarily should have. Like a maintenance of the idea that we can still pretend that everything is normal. Because now we're meeting on zoom, classes can continue without an understanding that that fundamental context for what makes education effective has changed. Like students and faculty do not feel secure. They do not feel safe. They are more stressed and anxious than ever. And so rather than taking that pause and saying, "How do we re-evaluate everything in the face of this unprecedented situation," instead we said, "Well, we can move it online and everything's fine."

I think that the connection part has been great, but it has also illuminated the digital divide that I think a lot of people thought had gone away. Because in March 2020, when we all went online, then we very quickly saw which students and which faculty had access to technology, who had the privilege to have a personal computer or device at their home, who had a space where they could access their zoom classroom, who felt secure enough to turn on their camera, who had a webcam. And even just basic digital literacy skills as well, like who could figure out how to navigate with very little instruction putting all of your courses online, or now having to be a completely online student when you knew before that didn't work for you, and that's why you never took online classes. I think it definitely accentuated the digital divide. But then also I think probably the most harmful thing has been this just continuation of this facade that everything is normal because we can just move it online. And I'm not saying that remote education has been bad. There have been a lot of bad hot takes. It's such a complicated issue that has so much power and inequities that are contained within this complex situation.

But I do think that it probably exacerbated some of the burnout and the overworking conditions that were already inherent in our jobs, and in the way that education was structured. But it allowed folks to say, "Well, you're working at home. It's fine. Things should be easier." So it was almost like disingenuous, this idea of returning to normalcy as quickly as possible. But normalcy

for what purpose? Because was the idea that we wanted students to learn as much as possible? Or was the idea that we just didn't want to lose funding for students dropping out?

That's really cynical of me, but at least over the past two years, it seems like a lot of the decisions that I've seen made at upper administrative levels are not about student wellness, or student learning, or faculty wellness and faculty workload. It's about just maintaining as many students as possible with concern about what they're learning as a secondary and much less valued concern.

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