

Episode 34: Karen Keaton Jackson

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Karen Keaton Jackson about Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), the absence and silencing of HBCU voices and experiences in composition studies, teaching narratives in first-year writing, cross institutional collaborations, and writing centers.

A native of Detroit, Karen Keaton Jackson is a professor of English at North Carolina Central University, and began her academic career at Hampton University, graduating with summa cum laude distinction and received her master's and PhD in English Composition from Wayne State University. She currently is the director of the University Honors Program and has served on the executive boards for the International Writing Center Association, the Southeastern Writing Center Association, and the Council of Writing Program Administrators. In May 2015, she received a University of North Carolina Board of Governor's Award for Teaching Excellence. She maintains an active research agenda on the interrelated notions of literacy, race, and identity in the writing classroom. And more recently, she has focused on composition instruction and writing centers at HBCUs.

Karen, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: So most of our conversation centers on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and your institutional context, North Carolina Central University, a public HBCU in Durham, North Carolina. I want to start with a relatively broad question and then move towards specifics about your teaching and research. What are some commonplace assumptions or misconceptions about HBCUs?

KKJ: One of the common ones is that we're homogeneous, as we were just briefly talking about before, informally. HBCUs are so complex. Our student populations are so heterogeneous that I think because we're just not included in the conversations as much, and you may have one person presenting, then, you know, you get this one perspective of HBCUs, but you know, we're public and we're private; we are big and we're small; some have grown out of religious institutions versus state institution. I mean, yeah, like you name it, it's there. It's just, you know, we just haven't been in as many conversations. So the fact of how complex we are, I think is one of the biggest misconceptions.

And then I think the other thing that comes with that is who makes up our student populations. So I think overall for most HBCUs, the general number is that about 70% or so of our students are African American. The other 30% can be international students, white, Hispanic. I know my particular institution, a state institution in North Carolina, we have a growing Hispanic student and are purposely recruiting students because of the population in North Carolina. And so I think with, so you have the racial demographics and then I think the other thing is in terms of the student preparation level. I think we have a wide range of student competencies, which makes teaching very interesting and exciting and challenging. You know, I think because of the mission

of most HBCUs, you may have students in our classrooms who may not get a shot at another institution. And, you know, and part of that is our mission. We're serving underrepresented groups. I call them our diamonds in the rough, the students who have all the potential, but often because of the communities in which they grew up, the school systems in which they were in, the lack of access to college preparatory classes, honors, IB, you know, a lot of the school systems didn't have that.

Then they come to us, you know, "not prepared," right? So we have those students in our classroom who kind of just barely made it in, but they are here and they are ours and we will love them. And then we have the students who could have gone to Harvard or MIT or Duke, which is like 10 minutes from my institution, but maybe for financial reasons or family legacy or wanting to be at an HBCU, they've chosen to be in our classrooms as well. And so it makes it interesting. I think, you know, compared to say some institutions where the admissions requirements are a bit more strict, you know, educationally, you may have, you might be able to generalize a little bit more about your student population versus at an HBCU, it's very hard to just kind of generalize in terms of their level of preparation, kind of what exactly they look like. So, I think that's a big misconception that all of our institutions are the same, and then what our students look like, I think is another misconception.

SW: HBCUs have historically been innovators in education and composition studies. In your co-authored article in College Composition and Communication, "We Belong in the Discussion," you talk about the absence of HBCU perspectives in composition scholarship. In short, you say HBCUs have been silenced when they should be leading conversations about race and writing. You ask this question, "How and why can the field of composition benefit from the perspectives and experiences of HBCU compositionists, and more particularly HBCU African-American female compositionists?" If you haven't done so already, go read this article. It's absolutely phenomenal. Do you mind spending some time, Karen, talking about this article and answering the question you all ask about the importance of hearing from HBCU perspectives, particularly African-American female compositionists in conversations around race and writing?

KKJ: You know, my coauthors and I, they're amazing – Dawn and Hope – we spent a lot of years on this article. We had some rejections on this article. It was not an easy path and there were times that I wanted to give up on it. I think what I realized as we went through the writing process kind of how much we had to lay out to justify your very question that "No, this voice is needed," because what I felt like some of the comments were as we were going through the process, and rightfully so when I can step out of my own feelings, was just really having to justify, "But what is so different about your context that we need to learn something from you?" Because I felt like that was overall kind of this question, you know, "What are you doing that's so different from what we're doing?"

So part of it with my first answer, laying out our student populations. I think that's very different than a lot of schools. And certainly because I think just the ways that our institutions are set up, those at research one (R1) schools, you know, have the teaching assistant, you have a lower teaching load. I mean tenure is based on you having to publish a far higher load than what I would have to do, right, at a teaching institution. So I think just justifying the difference in the context was a really big piece. What I found in looking at a lot of the research that talked about

teaching African American students, I think I just kept looking and thinking, but that won't fit for all of my students.

I would think, you know, that might fit for the students who are growing up like my children, right. Who are very much aware of who they are and everything, but obviously they have a mom who's an educator. They have a father who went to college, you know? So just in terms of the expectations and what we exposed them to, it's very middle class, right. I mean, that's their upbringing. So when I look at some of the scholarship, I would think, "Okay yeah, that would fit for this type of student." But when I think about so many of my first-generation college students, and HBCUs have a higher percentage of them generally speaking than PWIs, there's just a difference there in terms of how to approach the students. What's going to engage them? There just maybe have to be some different ways that normally you might think, "Oh, a student should know this coming into a college classroom. I can assume that a student has this baseline level of writing experience or writing competencies." And I don't ever go into my classroom with that assumption.

Some students do, and then some students don't. And again, a lot of that I think goes back to that, the access and the school systems, and that's a whole different conversation. And I don't know if I'm answering your question, but I think just kind of those baseline assumptions that often we could make at other institutions, we can't necessarily make at all HBCUs. And I think specifically for African American compositionists, I had a mentor mention this to me, but I haven't seen the article for myself, but he was saying how there's some kind of research about Black women at HBCUs and how we're kind of the ones who, I think he used the terms like help keep the lights on in terms of really like wrapping our arms around our students and bringing them in.

And I think a lot of us do fit these "other mother" kind of roles. I always feel comfortable with like aunt or godmother because I just don't want to accept that I'm old enough yet to have kids who would be old enough for college. I guess I could technically, but I don't want to think about it that way. So when my students, are like, "You're like my academic mom," and I'm like, "Well, what if we say aunt or godmother?" like we're not ready for that yet. But I do understand, I mean, there's a lot of time, like on a regular basis spent really stepping into that kind of mothering role, mentoring role in a way that's just totally outside of academics. And it's just a totally normal part of the day. I mean, it's just like teaching class, you know, so it's not like this one off or "Oh, I had this moment that I don't normally have." It's pretty consistent that students searching for, again, that kind of mentoring, but with a little mix of love, you know, mixed in there as well. So I think that in this other mothering kind of space where we're constantly weaving in the academics with this affective component of learning, which at HBCUs, you know, for those of us who are really there, that's just naturally woven in just like any other part of your syllabus or your class.

SW: You talk about being students advocates and "other mothers" or aunts or godmothers. In your writing class, I know you like to teach and include narrative writing. I believe that assignments, or the genres we use to teach writing have a different effect based on our local context and students. So genres, then, to me are dynamic and powerful social actions. That said, I imagine many of us have familiarity teaching and using a narrative based assignment or reading in first-year writing, say for example, a literacy narrative. I was hoping you could talk

more about how you frame narrative writing, given your institutional context and students, and how you navigate conversations on literacy and language in the writing classroom?

KKJ: I do have students do narrative writing. You know, and I know there's differing opinions on should we include narratives and personal writing in the writing classroom or not, so I kind of go back and forth about it a bit, but I think I have them write narratives, but then we also read quite a few narratives, too. So the point that I feel like that I probably need to make that its own class because I keep wanting to add in more narrative pieces, but I'm like, this is only supposed to be one component of a class, very intentional with the narratives that we read and then tie into like their writings in the writing process because they so often turn it into a personal discussion, you know? So we start off with these academic conversations that turn very personal pretty quickly.

And I, you know, in teaching first year writing, I teach a lot of first year writing classes. I kind of see that as my role, because again, I view my classes as like the medium through which I can meet my students, you know, I think the longer I've been in my career, I mean I enjoy teaching writing, I love composition, that's great, but I've learned in the last few years that what really excites me is just getting at the heart of the students. But composition is such a cool and easy way to do that through the writings and the readings. Like you can just get right in there, but like we will read an excerpt from President Obama's "Dreams from my Father," Chapter 5 is like my favorite chapter. And he talks about, he's reflecting back on parts of his time in high school and in college where he's really trying to figure out his identity being biracial, but realizing he's kind of identifying more with being a Black male in part because of how he's viewed and how he's treated.

So he understands that this is in great part a role of who he is in society, but because of the way our society is structured, and he talks about a particular conversation he had with I guess a mentor, if he would formally call him his mentor, but I see him as kind of like this old sage in the neighborhood. He was like always kicking knowledge to the young kids. And he talks about this conversation where he's saying to Barack, as a form of advice, like be careful when you go to college because they're not going to educate you. They're just going to train you. And he says, you need to be careful because you may have to leave your race at the door and leave behind who you are at the door to be successful in America.

And so, you know, for my students, it launches us into this whole conversation of do you have to leave behind who you are to be successful in America. And you know, that's just the whole conversation in and of itself. So like that's a narrative piece. And then I'm like, "Oh, by the way, this is an example of a narrative and you're going to write a narrative next week." So we look at that. We look at some excerpts from Malcolm X's autobiography, the little excerpt where he talks about copying the dictionary when he was in prison and just learning that he needed to speak a different way depending on the audience. And so we have conversations in that class about audience and purpose. "Okay, well, Malcolm X said, when he's talking to politicians, he knows he should talk this way." So we have that general conversation, but then we talk about, is that really accurate or not?

You know, so we make all these judgements about people based on the way that they speak. But is it true that just because someone doesn't speak in standard English, that they're not smarter than the person who does, you know, and so then we get into those conversations. And so, it gets very personal. I don't know if they've ever had kind of permission, I think to speak about that intelligence isn't always reflected in standard English. I don't think they expect that in an English classroom, and I give them permission to talk about that. And I think I try to make it in a way that it feels accessible, where they feel free to really just kind of say it in an unrestricted kind of way even though I'm the teacher. So all that to say, I use the narrative as a way to have much larger life conversations that I feel at an HBCU, when I know I have this larger population of first generation college students and students who, some of them are really trying to figure out, can I do this thing called college or not? Can I make it? I just feel like it's my personal responsibility to go just beyond the academics, because there's just so much more happening in that first semester.

And so having them reflect on their own literacy practices, you know. We looked at the little excerpts from the Trayvon Martin, the George Zimmerman trial and Rachel Jeantel, the witness who was the star witness of the case, so to speak. And we know that Zimmerman was acquitted, but we look at the interview with the juror, one of the jurors from the case, on Anderson Cooper and how she says, "Well, Rachel Jeantel was not credible because of her," I think she used the term "education level" or her "communication skills." And so then we talk about the impact of the language and the literacy practice. So we just were able to dig into those conversations. And I feel that because of the context of the institution and they know that this is an institution that's essentially set up for them, right. That they might just feel more comfortable exploring some of those conversations. So the literacy is really just my jumping off point for a bunch of other stuff that may or may not be related to writing at all.

SW: So back to your article, "We Belong in the Discussion." Toward the end, you list calls for action or steps and directions composition studies can take to better support and include HBCU perspectives and experiences. Many involve partnerships with national organizations and R1, predominantly white institutions (PWIs), which seems really intentional for your purposes. I'm also wondering what other kinds of relationships and collaborations can exist across institutional sites that are often marginalized in scholarship or voices that are often less present in research. For example, HBCUs collaborating with Two-Year Colleges?

KKJ: I mean, I think there's definitely a lot of overlap in the student populations, for sure. And often, you know, as I mentioned earlier, sometimes looking at some of the articles that are out, and I think, I don't know if that would fit my student population. When I talk with colleagues at community colleges, we often have a very similar perspective on some of those types of things. So I do think there's definitely a lot of room for joint collaboration and research given the overlap and the institutions. We were pretty intentional in the article in calling out R1s, they have more money to do things, and access, you know, so we were very intentional with that. I think community colleges, you know, you could make the same call for them as well. But I think in the article we were looking at where in general, a lot of the voices tend to come from that dominate the scholarship, not always, but that kind of dominate, and those are the voices.

You know, my response, and this may sound kind of flippant, but I'm like, "But how many Black students are you teaching each year or each semester?" And you're making these large generalizations of this is how we teach African American students. And I'm just like, but you, I don't know, may have to teach ten years to get the number we have in one or two.

So I mean, we were very intentional with that. I think just because, I think we saw it as, you know, they may have more access to the resources, do the research and we have the student populations that they need. So that was intentional just in terms of where I think we could really help each other. But certainly I think with community colleges, a lot of overlap in the conversation that could glean a lot of the same, some of the same things. I think what makes the HBCU context different, though, is that again, historically, with the exception, only HBCUs and tribal colleges were institutions that were literally set up with the context of wanting to educate this certain population.

So, we were very specific in our article to distinguish between HBCUs and other MSIs, because I think that's one of the other things to just want to lump us all together, so like, see, we're all the same. And it's like, "No, we're not because our institutions were set up for this purpose." So all of the speakers that come on campus, the organizations, you know, it's not pigeonholed to, "This is the Black student group bringing in these speakers," like everything. So the honors convocation, the founder's day graduation, everything is catered toward this particular group versus other MSIs. It's just, does your enrollment hit 25% this year, but I don't know how much structurally the campus changes to reflect those students.

SW: You directed the writing studio at North Carolina Central University. What role do you see writing centers playing in the context of HBCUs and what sort of differences are there compared to writing centers at PWIs?

KKJ: Yeah, I think that's maybe, now I've shifted my role on campus, but sometimes I feel like I have one writing center article left unwritten in me. As I think about that, I think right as I was transitioning out into my current role, and I really started to think about how I could articulate some of those differences with HBCU writing centers, because I felt the same way about writing center scholarship, and, you know, I've talked about that at conferences and things. So I get that affective component. I think that's always my bottom line, for me, that affective component, no matter where you set me, I'm always going to talk about the affective component of learning. Our writing centers, just one very basic level in our writing center at North Carolina Central University, we have an administrative assistant who makes all of our appointments so students can call or they can come in person.

And I know probably almost everyone else under the sun uses WC Online or something similar, and the students can go in and make the appointments themselves. I think we tried that for all of two days. Part of it is probably my anal kind of temperament. So part of it is just my, probably my own thing. You know, I think our students turned our schedule upside down so much within two days, we were like, "Oh, we can't give them this much access to our schedule because we can't keep up with it." But again, thinking about our student population, a lot of our students really didn't know quite what they needed. Like they knew they needed help, but, you know, they thought they only needed 15 minutes while they really need an hour.

We talked to them, our administrative assistant, like that's my frontline person. And I was very intentional with who I hired for that position. Like to me, it's not just somebody answering phones, it's somebody who's calming a student who walks in and feels like, "Oh my gosh, I'm a horrible writer," or "My professor just tore up my paper," or "I hate my professor" or, I mean, there's a lot of emotion that comes when students walk in through the door. There's a lot of stigma attached with getting help. And that's not just in the Black community. I think that's across the board, but certainly for some of our students, I think they felt some kind of way, you know, coming in for help. So for them to come through the door was like a big win already. And I want to have someone there who was encouraging, again, that kind of other mothering, right?

Like, "You can do this, we got you, I got just the right consultant for you." You know? So our administrative assistant is very intentional with who she would partner them with based on the different consultant strengths and weaknesses, and based on what they need that I don't think a computer system can do, right. And so, we want us to keep our students coming back. We want to keep our enrollment up, our retention numbers, all of that is a big part of it. And so again, if you have a large number of your student population that's just totally unfamiliar with navigating this college thing, I'm a firm believer that that hands on piece makes a big difference in why we have so many repeat clients, why our numbers grew by leaps and bounds during the time I was director. And clearly it wasn't just me.

It was really the consultants and the frontline person. I was just kind of in the back. But they did an awesome job in being ambassadors for the writing studio. But I don't think without that personal touch, that we would have drawn in as many students in that kind of way. So that's just kind of one thing that we do that I think is very different when I would talk to other writing center directors. That's something that I wouldn't bend on. I mean, there was a time where they were trying to decrease our number of administrative assistants and that kind of thing. And I was really advocating like, no, I don't want a work study student here and just randomly scheduling students. Like I need a key person here.

SW: So let's come full circle. This is my last question. Do you feel like there's an absence and silencing of HBCU writing center voices and experiences in writing center scholarship, too, and how can that be addressed?

KKJ: Yeah, so absolutely. I believe there's a gap for sure. I mean, I think a lot of similar approaches can be taken in terms of the collaborative pieces. I was a member of the SWCA board, the Southeastern Writing Center Association board. And one thing I was really excited to do just before I transitioned off of that a few years ago was to help them establish a position for an HBCU representative. I'd been kind of talking about it for a couple of years and it seemed like, you know, everyone was like, "Oh, okay." And then you would just go into the next agenda item, and it wasn't really taken seriously for a while. Then, we had a really great, I can't remember what year, but we had a really great SWCA conference at East Carolina University.

You know I have to give a shout out, it was Will Banks and Nikki Caswell headed it up. And it was dealing with issues of diversity and difference. It set the perfect tone of really digging into these honest conversations about diversity. And so then when we had our follow-up board

meeting, it was almost like, how can we not say it now and do it now because the conference just set up the theme just so brilliantly. I think Vershawn Young was the keynote speaker that year. Again, I wasn't obviously the only person to do it, but, you know, that was kind of one of the things I was able to help usher in that position for the HBCU representative, having those intentional positions on the boards. And particularly, because of our region, most HBCUs are in the Southeast. So kind of like, how can we be so absent here, like regionally, and there are so many of us here.

I think having more representation on boards and actively reaching out to HBCUs a lot. You know, we're smaller functions in general. A lot of us are wearing many hats, writing centers included. So I think having to intentionally reach out makes a difference, you know, so it's not just like, "Ok, we put it on our website and stuff, they didn't respond. That just means they didn't want to come." And it's like, no, it might be because they were running the writing center and teaching four classes. Like they didn't have time to really look. Not that, you know, if you didn't take time to extend the offer, they wouldn't come, but sometimes it's just there are a lot of different things on our plates.

And so I think just being intentional, reaching out, and trying to mentor. Again, I think value, I think if people feel that their voices are valued, you know, then you're more apt to want to dig in and give a little bit of extra energy. I think that that part of being intentional is really, really, really key. You know, sharing the wealth a little bit more. I mean, I think we need to be everywhere, right. So maybe we can be at all different places. You just have a lot of different voices coming in at one time, which would be like our utopia, right?

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