Episode 106: Kathleen Blake Yancey
Transcript

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In this episode, Kathleen Blake Yancey talks about her first experience teaching writing, offers advice for first time teachers, describes a philosophy of reading and responding to student writing, discusses waves in writing assessment research and theory, and teaching for transfer.

Kathleen Blake Yancey, Kellogg W. Hunt Professor of English and Distinguished Research Professor Emerita at Florida State University, has served in several leadership positions, including as President of NCTE; Chair of CCCC; and President of CWPA. A past editor of College Composition and Communication (2010-2014), she is author or co/editor of 16 scholarly books--among them *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition*, and *Sites of Writing; A Rhetoric of Reflection*; and *Assembling Composition*—and of over 100 articles and book chapters. She is the recipient of several awards, including the CCCC Research Impact Award; the FSU Graduate Mentor Award; the Purdue Distinguished Woman Scholar Award; and the CCCC Exemplar Award.

Kathleen, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You've been teaching writing for over 40 years, and I was hoping to give you some space and time to reflect. How did you get into teaching? What was that first class that you taught like? And looking back, what advice would you give yourself or someone else about teaching for the first time?

KBY: The way I got into teaching, I saw them, it was during the Vietnam War, when I was an undergraduate, and they were encouraging us to – they being professors – were encouraging us to really read through the lenses of larger contexts. And the classroom was a very exciting space. The work was intellectual. And I thought, "Oh gosh, this is something I'd really like to do." I mean, it was not like being in high school. I had very good high school teachers and I liked a lot of them, but I didn't identify with them. I never looked at them and thought, "Ah, I'd like to do that." I think there was one teacher in particular actually when she was ABD, so she had not finished. I'm not sure she ever did finish. And she was part of a group of younger faculty and they clearly talked to each other and they brought those conversations to us.

I had another mentor, Panthea Broughton, who's a Faulkner scholar who left. I was at Virginia Tech, who left Virginia Tech and went to LSU. So, I was lucky. I had a number of teachers who were just wonderful. I looked at the work they were engaged in and it was the balance between

research and teaching and having each of those feed the other. And I thought, "This is great." I like the sense of community with other teachers, but also the opportunity to contribute maybe to a different community that your scholarly community might be a somewhat different community. So, that really appealed to me.

The second question was the first class I taught, and it does make me laugh. There are actually two of them. I student taught during the summer. I had one class of accelerated students who were taking American literature in advance, so they could finish high school more quickly. They were good students. They were well-behaved. The teacher was really nice, but dull. I was 21 years old and very excited and they loved me. Really, I could do no wrong. It was great. I had to be careful because we didn't want the dull teacher to know that actually there was a love affair going on here, but it was great.

The other class, which is the one that really makes me laugh, was a class of about 19 students. One female, all the rest male. They had all failed ninth grade English. So, they were not excited to be in the class during the summer when they would rather be doing anything else. On the other hand, most of them consoled themselves by coming to class stoned. Which on the one hand, you have no behavior problems. That's the good news. But at the same time, it's really hard to engage people who are stoned. You may not be aware of that, but I can tell you from firsthand experience, this was absolutely true. Not only that, but the cooperating teacher, who was a wonderful guy, named Walter Robinson, looked at me the first day and said, "Well, they failed with the regular curriculum. So, we won't be using that. And we won't be using the textbook that you've been given and you'll need to think of what we will be using."

And, I sort of thought, "Oh, I'm in trouble, I'm in big..." and this was on a Friday and I spent the whole weekend trying to figure out what I was going to teach these young men who clearly didn't want to be there. Unfortunately for me, and really unfortunately for them, I don't know why I made this choice…I have no idea. Spent the whole weekend at the library, and all I came up with, and it's unbelievable anybody would come up with this, but I did, was Lillian Hellman's *Watch on the Rhine*, which is a play.

I mean, we don't have, you do not have enough life left, no matter how long you live, to list all the reasons why you wouldn't use that. But I did. I brought it into class. I'm working with them and I mean, this is tanking, this is tanking every day. Tanking. I wanted to say something to the cooperating teacher like, "It's tanking, what should we do?" I kept thinking he would say something to me and he didn't, this guy had the patience of Job. After about two weeks of this, it was, again, another Friday afternoon—it turned out to be fateful that summer. I looked at him and I thought, "I don't think this is going very well." He looks at me, he said, "That's right." It was clear. He's been waiting for me to say something, why didn't you say something?

So, then I went back and spent, again, the whole weekend devising another approach to the class, which I don't think was award winning, I have to say. But it was better than Lillian Hellman's

Watch on the Rhine, which may be wonderful, I'm sure it is wonderful in other settings, but for this particular moment, not so good.

That taught me, now I'm getting to your third question, that and several other experiences taught me that, it's funny, people…it's sort of a truism. And a truism has some element of truth within it, but is missing something as well, and more than nuance. So, it's a truism that high school teachers teach students and college teachers teach content. I think the reality is that both teachers or the teachers in both settings teach both content and teach students. And one of the ways we might think about my student teaching experience was that I didn't have to worry about the students so much in the American lit class, because they were already prepared to do what we needed to do. And the other students were not; instead of thinking about who they were and what they needed, asking them who they were and what they needed. People are actually pretty smart.

You can ask them. They will tell you. There are many ways to ask. It's not always directly. But there are ways of accessing that kind of information. That's where I should have started. I should have started with them. But I was so anxious, I couldn't get outside myself. So, that's another lesson, getting outside yourself, keeping your focus clearly on students, working with them from the very beginning, because you're going to be working with them and learning with them as you go throughout. And never again that I start a class without asking students, “Hi. Who are you? What do you know here? And what would you like to know?” You can do it in fun and interesting ways. And I found some of those.

SW: In 1998 you published a book called Reflection in the Writing Classroom and in Chapter 5 you write, “Somewhat surprisingly, given the teaching, reading, and writing that English faculty do for a living, we don't talk very much about a philosophy of reading student work, or a philosophy of responding to student work, or even a philosophy of evaluating student work” (97). How do you feel like the field of writing studies has developed in these reflections and philosophies?

KBY: I think we've done a better job of exploring our own individual dispositions in that regard. So, if you look at something like Twelve Readers Reading, which was a book that was published by Ron Lunsford and Rick Straub, it was an account of 12 well-known figures in the field at the time; it was published about the same time. So, it's contemporaneous with *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*. I mean, it's not perfect. There have been some critiques/issues that I think are worth paying attention to, but it is a very interesting empirical study of how people respond to student work, I'll just say. And no surprise, somebody like an Ed White responds very differently than somebody like a Chris Anson, even though we're all members of the same field.

But what's interesting is, I mean, it's a really interesting study and there's a logic to each of their responses. So, it's not like good, bad, tall, short. The question is, from my vantage point, a philosophy attempts to articulate a phenomenon, let's say, in this case, response to writing. So, what is the purpose of response? Is the purpose to communicate with students? Is it to motivate

students? Is it to make better writing? Is it to enhance the writing process? Those are the kinds of questions that I would expect a philosophy to be able to answer.

My own sense is that a lot of work has been done in this area, both within the field and outside the field. I'll just point to two really interesting strands. One clearly has to do with antiracist work, and the role that both response and assessment can play in that. Although, I'll also say that in the assessment world, attention has been paid to the effects of assessment in terms of racism…that's been part of writing assessment since the current iteration of the field. So, it's not new, though it's certainly taken a different cast, I would argue.

The other thing I would suggest is that fields outside of ours, like Association Americans of Colleges and Universities are looking at the relationship between assessment and assignment making, which is, I mean…they have a new project that either has rolled out or that is about to roll out, and the project involves faculty in writing studies coming up with advice to create assignments where students could develop a set of outcomes. That's a really, really intriguing approach. And it's interesting to me that people outside our field, AAC&U, is leading that effort and we are not.

So, that's my long-winded way of saying that there's really interesting work going on inside the field. There's also interesting work going on outside the field. And it would be great to have those efforts talk to each other more. And let me give you another example. So, maybe this is out there, but I don't think so, I mean, there's a *Journal of Response*, there are two journals in writing assessment. There are a lot of venues, not to mention all the books and special issues. And so, there's a lot of activity, which is great. But deferred grading of writing, which is another area, under the guise of portfolio assessment. You have "ungrading," which is a whole 'nother movement with sort of, again, not really writing studies oriented, really sort of an educational context. And then, you have labor-based grading contracts and you have a new book out now that suggests labor is not the dimension that should really inform those contracts, that it really should be measures of engagement.

So, you have a lot of work here. The work, the pieces of work do not seem to be talking so well. I mean, the engagement versus labor-based grading contracts, that is according to the author, Ellen Carillo, that is a response to labor-based contracts. I mean, so the one, those are. I can't say those are not connected, but these other pieces are all related. But they're not connected. And yet, if you bought them all together, I think you would have the beginning of a philosophy of assessment that would include all these different pieces. I would argue that even though it's almost 25 years later, there is still a need for that, that we don't really have.

SW: My previous question reminds me of another article you wrote in 1999 called "Looking Back as We Look Forward: Historizing Writing Assessment" where you describe three "waves" of writing assessment. The first wave was "objective tests" from 1950-1970, the second was "holistically scored essays" from 1970-1986, the third was "portfolio assessment" and "programmatic assessment" beginning in 1986. Kathleen, would you assign an endpoint to that

third wave now? And also, what other waves might there be given the last 20 years of research and writing assessment theory and practice?

KBY: Yeah, no, it's another great question. So, the thing about waves is that they are waves. So, they don't really have endpoints. They diminish, they diminish, or they increase in size, or they have more velocity. Even though most institutions are now going test optional, we still have the SAT. We still have Compass. We still have ACCUPLACER. Standardized tests have not really gone away. Holistically scored essays have definitely not gone away. The AAC&U VALUE rubric has contributed to that for good or ill.

And the thing about portfolios is that they are still very much alive and well, partly because portfolios went from portfolios to electronic portfolios. I'll just say ACC&U right now is sponsoring an institute on e-portfolios, which involves teams in campus-wide efforts. They have almost 30 teams that have signed up for this year, I have to say, with very little participation from the writing community. That's not to say there isn't good work going on in e-portfolios within the writing community, because there absolutely is. But it is to say that there's a lot of work outside the writing community that contributes to our own work one way or another. In other words, context matters here.

The reason I think that e-portfolios have continued is because of the marriage between assessment and electronics. And the other thing, the other reason I think that the program assessment continues is because we're still, I would use the word, recovering from The Spelman Report, which was during the Bush administration, which basically one implication of the Spelman Report is that universities were not teaching students anything at all. And then that was further contributed to by the work by the authors of *Academically Adrift*, which was an article, as the title suggests, trying to demonstrate, I think, failing to demonstrate, but they think they've demonstrated that students are not learning anything in college, which I think anybody who spent a moment on any campus would find patently false, students are learning all the time, whether they're learning what you want them to learn or not, that's a different issue, but they're definitely learning, people learn, that's the nature of the human animal.

That said, program assessment is still, I think, very much with us. Portfolios, because of the “E” in front of them now, very much with us. But honestly, the big thing that strikes my fancy or is capturing my attention is technology, by which I mean digital technology. Let me point to a couple of things here. One is the field's fascination with, and I think now, commitment to multimodality, by which people don't really mean multimodality à la Cheryl Ball, which is the...I mean, a cave wall is multimodal, an MLA formatted very conservative term paper is multimodal, but when people say multimodal, what they tend to mean is what we're doing now, various forms of communication, that sort of à la Gunther Kress.

I would argue that the digital is, if not, the only motive, the primary motive for attention to multimodality and to link it to assessment, I'll just say, we don't have very good assessment practices for multimodal texts. That's an area where we need a lot of work. I'll also point out that

our teaching can be very influenced by technology. If you're using something like Criterion Online, which is a digital responding service, I'll also point out that the field has a new subfield called Data Analytics, which is combining data and program assessment. You have a lot of digital activity going on here.

And last but not least, I mean, people in writing assessment will say, and I think people in other fields as well, Walter Ong, for instance, famously said that writing was a technology. Well, yes, but right now, this is the most compelling piece I think: Technology is writing. There are basically software programs that write, as you probably know, they write sports stories for AP, they can write financial reports for top 20 corporations and they do. In a chapter I wrote for a book on communication of all sorts edited by Jonathan Alexander, Jackie Rhodes. I pointed to that at the end of the chapter, but really Bill Hart-Davidson has a whole chapter focused on that.

I would simply suggest that this is an area that we have really not paid attention to. I mean, put very bluntly, if software can write, what do I have to contribute here as a writer and as a teacher of writing? This is the fourth wave that is taking shape, and it has the potential to become a tsunami. I taught what is basically a one credit special topics course the last year that I was on staff at FSU. I called it "New Composings" and it took up a number of issues. It looked at, for instance, lifelong composing. The work that Louise Phelps has published on, Chuck Bazerman is leading some of that work. So, that's a new domain for composing in an interesting way. But we also looked at technology as well. It was with completely different set of readings, a repeat of a special topics that I'd done two years previously.

One of the articles we read, I'll give you three articles that we read one week. One was by John Gallagher called "Writing for Algorithmic Audiences" that was in *Computers and Composition*. A second was by John Seabrook, who's a writer for *The New Yorker* called "The Next Word," that talked about his experience trying to write with software. And then, Bill Hart-Davidson, "Writing with Robots and Other Curiosity of the Age of Machine Rhetorics," in Alexander and Rhodes. I have to say that students in the class were bright, as always, and energetic. When they read Gallagher's "Writing for Algorithmic Audiences," it just sort of knocked them off their feet, because it so challenges our conception of audience that you would write for...and yet, if you want students to write for the web, don't they have to pay attention to this? Isn't that now part of the equation?

There are three questions here that I think that teachers need to take up. I was going to say "we" as teachers, because I'm still doing some teaching here. How much of this, this being technology is writing? How much of this do students need to know and why? How much of this should students do? And by students, I really mean all students. I don't mean students only in upper-level courses or graduate school, I mean first year comp. Is this something that we have to take up? And if yes, where do they engage in these practices? Where does this take place? Because as far as I'm able to tell, these questions are not currently informing the curriculum and I think they need to. I think they need to, at least in the sense that people need to have grappled with them. And if they decide, no, not now, for good reasons, which they may, I mean that may exactly be

the best answer, because technology changes so rapidly, they will need to revisit them fairly soon.

SW: Kathleen, this is my last question. You've written a lot on writing transfer and writing across contexts, too. I would encourage everyone to read Writing across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing. Do you mind talking a bit about Teaching for Transfer (TFT) and what you think this kind of curriculum offers writing teachers and students?

KBY: Sure. No, that's another lovely set of question. So, thank you. So, I didn't come to it this way, but I want to tell a quick story as a way of explaining transfer and also explaining why I'm interested in transfer. So, several years ago, I was at a symposium at the University of Minnesota that was led by Pamela Flash. She leads a writing cross-curriculum program called Writing-Enriched Curriculum. And at the end of that symposium, and it was really interesting, because there were just faculty from all different fields on campus talking about what they were doing with their students.

And there's no question, by the end of the day, what we had before us was a dizzying array of definitions of writing. Where writing in dance, there were no words on the page, for instance. Writing in the sciences was fully multimodal without anybody talking about multimodality. Writing in history was really very text-centric, really, really different.

And the question I put to the person who was leading the first year comp program was, what kind of a curriculum in first year comp does one develop and offer that will prepare students for any one of these? Because you don't know where they're going. That's essentially the transfer question from the perspective of a first year comp. I mean, and I've done workshops related to this topic and related to this book and, I mean, you can't prepare students for everything. I mean, what I like to do in those workshops, especially when they're workshops with Black faculty is I look at them and I sort of put my glasses at the end of my nose. And I say, "This may come as a surprise you, but I'm not actually qualified to teach people to write in chemical engineering." And then they all laugh, because the idea that I would be teaching anybody anything in chemical engineering is pretty funny. And you could choose any number of fields by the way.

So, we can't teach them everything. What can we teach students that will help them as they move on? That's the fundamental question that transfer tries to answer. The answer that initially Kara Taczak, again, and Liane Robertson and I came up with, which at this point was over 10 years ago, was a curricular framework that we have called teaching for transfer that has three component parts to it.

So, one is a set of key terms. Those key terms are fundamental. We started out with 11, it was too many for our students. 11 would not stick. We'd sort of come up with a magic number of seven or eight. A second is systematic reflection. That's really focused on what students are learning and the connection students are making much less focused on process. And the third is a theory of writing that students complete at the end of the term, they work on it throughout. But

the idea is, how do you define writing? Based on these key terms, based on your experiences, both in and out of school, before you got to us and so on.

Now, that initial effort has been subsidized by two grants from CCCC, one grant from the Council of Writing Program Administrators. We've brought in several other people, including people at various kinds of institutions among them are community colleges. And the whole purpose of these reiterative efforts was to try to determine whether or not this curricular framework could serve many different kinds of students on many different kinds of campuses, literally from the Pacific Northwest and Washington state to Florida.

And the short answer is, yes, the good answer is that actually it does. And we have over a hundred students that we've studied and that we've learned from. What we found very briefly is that the curricular framework is actually quite adaptable. People use lots of different kinds of pedagogies. They use different kinds of readings than we've originally used. They've structured the systematic reflection in different ways. They've taken other focal points. So, Kara, for example, has built in a media emphasis in some of her classes. Our colleague in the University of California system, Tanner WouldGo, has built in a social justice component.

So, one of the things we've learned in addition to learning that it does serve lots of different kinds of students on lots of different kinds of campuses, is that it is actually highly adaptable. We thought that it was, and now we know that it is. It's also highly adaptable in that we've used it in different curricular sites. We've used it in first year comp and second year comp, in technical writing and professional writing and in internship preparation. So, it seems adaptable in that regard. There's actually some work out of a chemistry program that took the framework that kept some of the word, the key terms we've identified, added some of their own for a kind of hybrid model. And it worked for those students programmatically. So, the research is really very, very exciting.

At this point, we have an article that's out for review, that I hope we'll hear about it maybe in the next month or so. And this is another exciting part of the research is that it's teaching us a lot about how writers develop. So, two quick things. One is that over the life of this project, we've learned from students that honestly, they're learning a lot about writing, how to write and about writing. Insights outside the classroom and outside writing centers. They're learning about it in workplace situations. They're learning about it in co-curriculars. They're learning about it in self-motivated writing situations.

When we ask them to bring all those learnings together, that is also when their development seems to take off. So, that's one thing. So, one challenge I would issue to all of us is, how can we build in those other sites of writing into our curriculum, so that students are not disregarding them, but building a fuller, more coherent model? And again, it goes back to what I said at the very beginning of the interview. Students know a lot. We didn't understand how much they were learning outside the classroom.

And in fact, we have a graph that we've changed. The initial graph of how students writing development on the basis of this model, the classroom, front and center, big circle, couldn't miss it, knock it out. And the second graph has the student as a site on a network. So, the students at the center and the network connects to all these different spaces. Totally different model, came out of the same project. So, we're a lot smarter now.

Second point I'll make is that our latest research, this project that's out now, that comes from eight sites, five four-year colleges, three community colleges, again, all across the country, we found is that students bring to this curriculum, and we actually think to curriculum more generally. Different levels of readiness. So, a good question would be to ask how ready are you for college comp? And it turns out that the students are less ready for college comp, really do need to work on process first, before they can embrace the content. They're not ready for the key terms. They need the process first.

Some students learn the key...when they've got some process under their belts, under their control, they can use the process to understand the key terms. A lot of students do that. Other students don't need to do that, and they are ready to embrace the key terms. And what they like about the key terms is that they finally have a language to describe what they're doing. And I have to say that the students who broke out this way, sort of process, process and content, and then content, they were not specific to any campus. You couldn't just say, “Oh, it's these students at this four-year who were doing X.” No.

And in fact, one of the interesting things, one of the students that we end this article with was a student who really, she wants to be a nurse. So, I'll tell you what, I mean, going back to the issue of audience, because the notes that she was making as a nurse are so critical to patient care and so critical for communicating with other nurses and with the doctors, she understood audience in a way that very few other students did. She was a community college student. She wasn't a particularly strong student in high school, but her work experience had taught her so much about what she needed to know about writing. It was just astonishing. That's the kind of thing that we're finding in this project.

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