

Episode 118: Kendra L. Mitchell

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Kendra L. Mitchell talks about teaching at a public Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in Florida, antiracism, and writing centers.

Kendra L. Mitchell, Ph.D., is director of composition and assistant professor of English at Florida A&M University, where she has taught composition, literature, and historical linguistics. She serves as a newly elected Executive Committee member for the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) and was also appointed to the NCTE Committee for Change, a social justice-driven committee. Her writing center scholarship can be found in the *Writing Center Journal*, *Praxis Journal*, several book collections. Her current scholarship includes mapping geospatial, social, and multimodal circulation of Black identities and culture at HBCUs found in her forthcoming co-edited special issue in the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*, "Transdisciplinarity @HBCUs: (Re)Writing Black Futures beyond the Margins," and her forthcoming HBCU writing center co-edited collection from University Press of Colorado, *Makin' A Way Outta No Way: HBCUs, Writing Centers, & Antiracism*. She served as a cultural ambassador to South Africa in 2016 as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant. She started a nonprofit in 2020, Leading Literate Lives (L3), to inspire historically marginalized youth towards global diplomacy through her diverse programs with the goal of international travel.

Kendra, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Let's start by talking about your journey to teaching writing and how you became interested in rhetoric and composition. What did that look like for you?

KM: Oh, it looked like a great labyrinth of decisions. It's actually funny, I think about this process a lot and there are moments where I'm in the classroom like, "Wow, I never thought I would be here." I started off as...I actually attended school at FAMU, Florida A&M University, the HBCU in Tallahassee where I now work. I'm working in the department that I actually was enrolled in. So this is a full circle conversation. But how it started was that I had a friend in high school who knew she wanted to go to FAMU and I thought I wanted to go to another HBCU, Morgan State, because my friend was going to Howard, you know, and it was just like, "Yeah, we can go to New York every day." That was my vision of school at that time.

And so I'm very happy that this other friend interrupted that train of thought. And she said, "I need to know my roommate. Why don't you apply to FAMU?" So in applying to FAMU, of course, I had to think about, well, what would my major be? I had been in the Business Professionals of America Club in high school, and I won a couple awards and I think it was just accidental. Like, I don't know how I knew I could do these things, but I just did it. So FAMU

was known like worldwide for their business program. So I started off in business administration because, “Hey, you know, I won an award.” That must mean that's what I'm supposed to do. Gotta be the path, right? I got admitted to their four year program and came to FAMU, had my roommate, you know, life was looking good until it wasn't.

I had no real like...how or what or why I was doing what I was doing. I started to get a little curious about writing and developing my writing. I had friends who I sang with, I was in the gospel choir, so I sang with them and they would tell me about these cool writing classes that they took and how they learned these other skills that I was like dying to learn. I was like, “How do you know how to write like that? How do you know?” I was writing more creatively and I wanted to be this awesome writer. I just would sit on the stoop and ask them questions about their classes. And they were like, “Well, maybe you should just like take a class.” And I was like, “Well, well...” so it took me a long time and it took the bottom falling out for me.

I ran into some financial hardships as an out-of-state student without a scholarship, without any financial plan. I had to really be serious about the classes that I would be taking. So it kind of...I call it “phase one” and “phase two” of my undergraduate career. So the phase one was like the automatic enrollment of school that most students kind of, you know, just kind of get farmed into like, well, the next thing you do is you graduate from high school. Then you go to college. That's what any good student is taught to do. Especially in '98, that's what we were told was the pathway to success. Especially being a daughter of a single parent home, you know, striving for middle class status. I didn't know any of that at that time, but that's what the models were for me. So that meant college. I didn't know really...I didn't have time to think through it. My mom hadn't been a college graduate. My dad was not a college graduate. I was the first one of my parents to even go away to school. So this was all very new.

I had to learn very quickly, “What did it mean to kind of find your own path?” A lot of this ties into my teaching philosophy and my approach, but I journeyed through that. Had so many hardships financially to the point where I had to market myself. I had to storm down, you know to financial aid. I had to go and find scholarships and sponsors. I ended up getting a sponsorship, a major sponsorship that wiped out my undergraduate debt and allowed me to be an in-state student. That changed the game for me.

So at that period of time, while I was working through that and working odd jobs and trying to keep up with classes, I would audit classes. I would just, you know, be studious. I was intentional about my learning in a way that I was not when I graduated from high school, because I didn't really have that model. I had aunts and uncles who went away to college, but I never got to see it up closely. But this journey ended up looking like, well, okay, while you're you are working at Chick-fil-A mopping floors and while you're a cashier here and, you know, bank teller there, what is it that you really wanna do? Are you doing this because you wanna go back to being a business administration student or is there something else? I remembered those conversations on the stoop, right, with my friend.

I was like, well...I was very interested in English, and I wanted to write, and I knew that my writing was not at the standard that I was reading. Right? You know, I would read these books and I'm like, "I'm very interested in getting this kind of fluidity." You know, this writing fluidity. I wanted my thoughts to be that crystal clear on the page. I knew I had a journey and I figured majoring in English would be the way. So I changed my major and it really did open some doors for me that I did not anticipate.

I got the funding, like I said, got back in school, and this was what I call phase two. I had this zero tolerance for distractions. I came in, I was 24 years old, and I knocked it out. I thought I had more time than I had to invest in schooling. But it only took two years after that and I ended up getting like the best grades I ever had in my life. Like, okay, I started off on the Dean's list and all that. That was cute. I had never seen straight A Kendra. Okay? I met her. She got it done. It didn't matter what it was. She was an honors student. Like I didn't even work that hard in high school. So all of that to say all that hardship and those real life experiences made me come face to face with what I eventually decided to follow the path I decided to follow. That's how I became an English major.

Really quickly, how I became invested in rhetoric and composition. So that was only phase one. What do you do after it? My professor was like, "Oh yeah, you need to go to graduate school." And I was like, "Well, I earned my bachelor's. This was hard." Like, I think this was great, but I ended up being selected by one of my professors to work in the writing center. All of this began with tutoring. I didn't know that I was really good at it because I was so insecure. Right? I came in, well, I need to fix myself. Right? But because I had bought books, I had been studying on my own and working independently on any assignment or any lesson, I taught myself more than I had known. And my professor saw it. She saw the potential...called me out. She would read my paper in front of the class.

I was like, "Where's my paper?" And then she would be reading it like, "This is an example of what we should be writing." I'm like, "Oh my gosh." So all that to say, she pulled me in right when I became an English major. I had about a couple years to build and watch and study. She took me to my first professional conference an SWCA conference. And that's where I ended up seeing how big it was. And I, you know, it's like, "Oh, this is a national thing. Like people actually do this." I just was hooked. You know? So those things that I learned before I was even an English major, I was being satisfied in the writing center. I had become so good at it that they created a position for me when I graduated. And then I became a professional, right.

I became a practitioner, and I went to a conference for my boss, and it happened to be a WPA retreat, the intensive three-day retreat. I met some other rhet/comp folk who pretty much convinced me that I needed to go ahead and get my application into Florida State. They were like, "I don't know what you're doing, but you're doing everything that's rhet/comp, everything you're doing is already in this field." I have been trying to go and do literature because I thought that was the way to go, you know, English literature. So that's how I ended up in this field.

SW: You're teaching at the university you went to school at as an undergraduate. What's it like teaching at Florida A&M University, a public HBCU in Tallahassee, Florida? Can you talk about your approach to teaching writing and how your experiences as an undergrad in that context has influenced your approach to teaching?

KM: I would like to start with your second question first. And I think it'll probably encompass the first one. I wear my story on my sleeve and I lead my classes with this. You know, a part of my introduction is to give them a background that I am one of them. I was in your shoes. Right? I say, even though we are in a different time, a different era, I have maybe more shared experience than you think when you see me as Dr. K. – I tell 'em to call me Dr. K. You see someone who seems to have it together because that's the snapshot, right? That's a quick picture, but I let them know. I understand. I empathize, right. I empathize. I know what those challenges are, how to negotiate.

Even some of the different approaches and teaching styles, I empathize...I can relate on a very personal level so that they don't feel like they're alone, because that was one of the things that I recognized is so easy to feel like you're alone, especially if you're first gen and you know, especially if you're a Black or Brown person. There is this imposter syndrome. You're not supposed to be here anyway. And, you know, even if you're at an institution where everybody, you know, at least not looks like you but you can find more people that look like you than not in that place...it can kind of give you a sense if everybody seems to get it and you don't, you still feel like maybe there's something I'm doing wrong, or maybe I'm wasting everybody's time. You may not utter it out loud, but it's something there. My experiences allow me to catch it a far off.

I can see the...I know what the behavior looks like before it's even uttered. When you are missing, I know that. I know what it's like to have to work 30 hours, you know, because you are not only supporting yourself. Right? You know, or you don't have someone to call to bail you out. You know, it's like, oh, I'm a struggling student. And you will struggle. You'll continue to struggle. Some of them are caregivers. You know, I'm currently a caregiver. I take care of my mother. I tell them these stories. I share my vulnerabilities more readily because of my experiences here. I think that is even different, you know, across the board. I won't say that everyone who has walked that path chooses that approach. But for me, I found it to be more effective, right, to build those relationships. I think that's paramount for students to tell you the truth...so that we can get to the nitty gritty of what is impacting your writing and what are the barriers.

Because I may think I know what the barrier is, but when you tell me, when you feel like you can trust me because I've experienced maybe not your particular plight, but I've experienced something like it. Right? Then that informs how I design assignments. We're not...I know that there are, I have colleagues who believe that writing is just writing. We definitely have administrators, you know, who feel like if you write one way here, it should be, you know, uniform, right. That current traditionalist model. But, you know, it's conflicted with the process because they wanna see a process. Right? You know, and that's not unique to our field, but

that...add on the systemic oppression that comes with the educational system and Black and Brown bodies, especially when it's gendered. When you have nonverbal communication that can be often, or is readily perceived as dubious or harmful to the classroom environment, you know?

So those are kind of like some of the barriers, but some of the joyful moments, right, which is what my research and everything is about looking at how we make a dollar out of 15 cents, how do we take these hardships, you know, how do the students do this? How do they overcome? How do they persevere? How resilient, or how does resilience look among these groups? So students who are up against so much...I create assignments that swing to their strengths. Like, okay, you wanna talk about something that matters to you? You know, Dr. K is not your hip hop scholar. I am not, I barely know the names of any music artist. I dare not even venture. I have colleagues who are amazing at that, you know, but my students relate to it a lot. What I do instead is for my developmental writing, for instance, I start off the class with social media, like a comparison between social media writing and classroom writing or academic writing.

I was like, okay, how do you show up on social media? What are the things that you value? How do you...let's do a rhetorical analysis. They don't know that we're doing a visual analysis. They don't know that, but we're looking at these images or we're finding images that maybe reflect that. Right? I'm using what they have and I'm helping them connect it with this community that was not necessarily created for them, but we make room for them. Showing them how to make room and take up space in the ways that make sense to them so that it makes it easier for them to connect and be flexible. The other areas that are probably a little more distant from them. I also...like my first-year comp, what we tend to do is we do problem based or even project based...so it depends on how I'm feeling. You know, I explore some of these new approaches or different approaches. They're not new, but they're new to me and most of my students. And so we will either take a problem and we'll look at a problem in their community. They'll observe a problem on campus and write about it from a personal...a narrative approach.

You know because we focus on the mode...our first-year comp, we write about the modes, right. So we get them to write that and they usually start off with some kind of narrative writing and then they'll either do, depending on the professor, they'll do something like process or compare and contrast or something like that. And then they'll do another mode, maybe descriptive or something. Then the last of 1101, they'll close off with a research paper. So that's what I do. I take them...for the problem based, I really have liked what they've done because I get them to think about the world outside of their experiences. A lot of them talk about, you know, maybe the violence, that comes up a lot. They're recognizing what's going on in the world around them and I'm trying to help them at least initiate these conversations and be change agents. You know, that's something pivotal for HBCUs. That's always what any HBCU is found upon: Taking our students and preparing them to be change agents in the world around them.

*SW: Kendra, let's talk about your research. You're working on a co-edited collection titled *Makin A Way Outta No Way: HBCUs, Writing Centers, & Antiracism* that aims to decenter whiteness within writing centers and writing center studies. Do you mind talking more about this*

collection and its vision and aims, and maybe this idea of being “change agents” – something you mentioned as folded into HBCUs? How do you hope to inspire program administrators, writing centers, and teachers through this collection?

KM: Yeah, that's a really good question. Shout out to Wonderful Faison, she is a phenomenal co-editor and has already published a book with Frankie Condon recently on counterstories and writing centers. So she kinda reached out to me and asked me if I wanted to contribute, and then I was like, “Hey, this is actually right up my alley. You know what my dissertation is attempting to do. I just hadn't had a chance to get back to it. I would love to work with it.” She was like, “Hey, you wanna be a co-editor?” I was like, “Absolutely.” And what we have been able to do with our call for papers is really just kind of think through what we mean and what we feel like is missing from our conversations.

You know scholars have already talked about how writing centers are rendered gendered, woman, female, and even white female. Right? You know, what that means. In 2018, Robert Randolph and I did a keynote at IWCA talking about dissenting whiteness and shifting that gaze. So not trying to fix up or pretty up, you know, put new drapes on what already exists. But really consider what would it look like if we actually started over here in the margins and used what they do in the margins, especially when we talk about resilience, we talk about dealing with antiracism. Well, have you even gotten curious about what happens in these spaces where they've had to resist and be resilient against systemic oppression for hundreds of years? Right, you know as an institution. Carmen Kynard talks about white supremacy structures in academia and...she gives us the image in one of her blogs. I still remember the impact. I was like, “Yes.” Reading it, I'm like, “Thank you.” This is what I mean, reading it, and talking about those habits or patterns of white supremacy structures.

It's not like the white cape, right, you know, walking around because we get distracted. It's like, oh, white supremacy. This is what we look for. But that becomes the scapegoat. The cape becomes the scapegoat and allows us to overlook the systemic processes. Right, right. That continue to hold faculty back. Faculty of color, in particular, in this country. What we are interested in doing in this book project is bringing those conversations to the forefront. Not just so HBCU writing center professionals can have a space to vent. That's not what this is.

Although, you know, they can do what they wanna do. This is their space, but it's not just that. It's the attempt to shift that gaze. To decenter that conversation that has been in existence for as long as we can remember, right. From the foundation, you know, even if you look at the early start. You know, some of the people that we always quote, Bruffee...you know, it's like, well, that's fine and good, but we are quoting them because they published. Just because these communities have not published at the rate of our White counterpart, you know, it does not mean that we do not have effective systems in place.

It makes me think about that same 2018 IWCA. Some of us in the writing center profession of Black writing center professionals, we heard an award was given to a scholar, a White scholar

who had done some work on an HBCU. In her presentation, she had rendered something unintelligible and we all looked at each other and we said, “Well interesting, because we all understand it perfectly.” Do you understand? So it's like, even if you see it first, it does not mean that you should be the one to speak on it. It does not mean that you have access just because you have rhetorical tools. It does not mean you have the appropriate ones. The culturally situated tools to decode what you are observing or what you think you're observing. So it's important this book is intended to bring those moments or those situations to light as well as to encourage and to foster more cross institutional partnerships.

I put a charge out and I said, “Hey PWI writing center directors, do you know your neighboring HBCU? Do you know who's directing that space? Do you know what their research focus is? Do you know if they have time for research? Do you have a way where you can actually partner with them to alleviate some of the burden? Is there something that can be done?” You know, if you have access, if you, and I don't mean for you to create a program and then invite them to come because that happened and I had to address it, you know, in a polite way, but firm it's like, okay, I think you misunderstood what I meant here. What I meant for you to do was to reach out and actually ask us what we wanted, what we needed, you know what matters to us. I tried to do a partnership and the current tutors were suspicious. They were concerned because the people who reached out didn't understand the history, right. The oppression.

A lot of times that can happen. You can be eager to be helpful without doing your homework. So this book is only part of the homework, right? We are sharing our scholarship, our research, our insight, we're letting you know that a writing center director at a PWI is not the same. It doesn't even matter. It's not the same as having to contend with the values and the systemic oppression that happens, that comes burdened with directing in a space like this. Right? And we need to get curious about it if we are indeed hoping to advocate for antiracism.

SW: Maybe I can pick up on that here and explore that curiosity a bit. Do you mind sharing what it's like being a writing center director and program administrator at an HBCU? Can you talk more about directing in that space and what that looks like at FAMU? You mentioned your dissertation, which explored multilingualism in a HBCU writing center. I imagine this is folded into your current research as well.

KM: Well, I think it has a lot of the similar tenants that most writing center directors have to contend with. You have competing entities or administrators who are like, “We value this,” but only in this very surface way. You know, we still are surprised when there's an administrator who gets it. It's like, “Oh, wow.” You know, that this is actually important for the outcome that you have, you desire. So we still have all of that because we are still in academia. Right? None of that has changed, but then what we understand as “good writing.” And how we assess that becomes an extra burden in this space. Because when you go to a predominantly white institution, it's almost assumed that “academic writing” is one note, right. And it is “standard English,” or dominant English, whatever you wanna call it.

It's that thing that gears centers around White ways of knowing and speaking and doing. So here we have all of these students who are coming from this space, we know they're here. We know, and we even use some of this, we share language, we share it, but the expectation is to code switch. That's the thing where it's the challenge? Like, do you teach what you know about the damage code switch brings, right? How do you negotiate that for business, right. You know, like, how do you negotiate? How far do you go? There's an extra responsibility on the tutors and the administrators. But I would tell you that they're so creative.

In my dissertation, I highlight how my tutors found a workaround. They would use African worldviews and African American worldviews to get to their end. You know? So they were like, "Hey, you know, teaching against code switching." So they did...it wasn't necessarily, "Okay, you need to fix this because this is a deficiency." Students came in with that sense of deficiency. Nancy, she talks about how students come in, especially students of color burdened with how wrong they are. And I would even argue that students in another class setting too, right. If they are coming in without the equal exposure and they know they don't have a laptop. I had a student who stopped coming to class because he didn't have a laptop, even though he could have taken notes, but it was so overwhelming to him. The shame that they carry with that, with not being like the others. So imagine what it's like to have students who are coming in, they don't get the assignment right away, or they get a mark that they didn't expect. And so much is riding on their success in college.

You know, so many people tell them is make or break. There's no other way. You gotta keep the family name good, all these pressures for a number of students. It's not just a portion of the students. They don't see entrepreneurship as another way, per se. I'm not saying times aren't changing. But you know, a number of the students that I see...I recognize that all writing centers kind of run through and the directors experience these things, but the training and having to consider the damage constantly, the collateral damage that code switching, teaching, and reinforcing code switching teaches them. It causes them to think that what they came with has no value. So then when they show up in those spaces and it's like, "Oh, wow, there's value here."

Like I read Teresa Redd's chapter about her experience or acknowledgement that we would read these authors, these Black authors who used all the rich language that we used at home, and we celebrate them. But the students who would write it in their papers would get low marks. Right? Elaine Richardson talks about it, her experience in a PWI. It's like, wait, I use this very specific, culturally relevant experience about this in this book that I have this intimate knowledge about these words and you're telling me it's not appropriate. That's the challenge that we have to do. So our staff, and I'm not the director, but I mentor the director, I train the students. I pull in some elements from my dissertation just so they can get a sense of all of the range, where their biases might be, where they have been conditioned to hate some parts of themselves.

Then they may also be taking it out...they might actually have strengths, like, "Okay, you are a rapper. You played with language all the time. Let's talk about how that works rhetorically and how you can push your students to tap into what they bring to the table." It's a nuanced thing.

And it's more complicated than maybe...oh, I forgot to mention budget. What budget? Like I rarely know a writing center director who gets a budget line. I don't know him. But so anyway, those are some of the unique differences that I'm not even able to do justice to it. Hopefully the book will highlight this from these different directors experiences, what they are negotiating and how we could learn as a field from them. Not just say, "Oh, poor, you know, poor things," but what can you draw from them? How can you shift what you have as normal and center what they're saying, and learn?

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