

Episode 147: Keshia Mcclantoc

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Keshia Mcclantoc talks about agency, access, multimodal pedagogies, digital writing, queer and feminist rhetorics, and queer literacies in the rural south.

Keshia Mcclantoc is a PhD candidate in composition and rhetoric within the UNL English department. She is interested in community and rural literacies, queer and feminist rhetorics, and digital archives and communities. She typically writes on how those with marginalized identities interact within digital and rural spaces, and is currently working on a dissertation dedicated to exploring queer literacies in the rural south. In teaching, which she does both in the UNL English and Women and Gender Studies departments, Keshia often uses pop culture as a pedagogical tool, encourages multimodal writing, and cultivates accessible and inclusive classroom spaces.

Keshia, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your teaching on research interests focused on agency and access in the first-year writing classroom. How are you defining, describing, and approaching agency and access? What does this look like for you in the classroom?

KM: So thank you for that question. So when I think about access, I've always kind of been sort access oriented. I am a person who is a first generation college student, I have multiple chronic illnesses, and so teachers who gave me access were always the sort of teachers that best served those needs. And so I've always sort of brought this ethos to my classrooms, but this especially became more prominent for me during the pandemic. So at my university, grad students are allowed to be assistant WPAs for like a single year and I just happened to have that position during the 2020 year. And this really made me sort of radically rethink access and what does access look like in our classrooms? And I've sort of come to the mindset that access really isn't just accommodations. Obviously basic accommodations are needed because people have body minds that need specific needs.

Started to think about access in more terms of how can we sort of like intellectually, emotionally, and sort of spiritually serve our students. So this sort of comes out from scholars who are focused on disability justice and who have this reprieve of access as love. So access is obviously the basic very material accommodations that students need, but it's also about speaking and understanding your students in intellectual, emotional, and spiritual ways. And so that's sort of where my mind is on access and that connects to agency and the fact that I always think about what types of actions can I do in the classroom or in the online space, because I teach online quite a lot, that allow students to become agents in their own learning. And in allowing them to become agents in their own learning, how can I help them also meet these intellectual curiosities and needs that they have, meet these sort of emotional moments that maybe they want to share with me or not share with me? And so that's sort of the philosophy behind it. But when thinking about what that looks like in a more tangible respect, this means sometimes, more sort of

overarching, I let students really pick their own subjects. I have a lot of freedom in my course design and so if I'm in like a writing and inquiry class, students spend an entire semester exploring the inquiry topic of their choice. Right now I'm teaching writing and community classes in an online format, so I'm having students study online communities of their choice, and that's just a way of giving them agency, and within their agency, I think there's also sort of access too because you're allowing students to both care for their own intellectual wants and needs and emotional wants and needs as you're doing it as their teacher by allowing them that agentic choice.

Other things that I do is I let students turn in works in progress instead of traditional drafts that way their writing can accommodate whatever writing styles they have. So some students like to turn in an outline, some like to turn full drafts, and some just like to vomit ideas on the page and then get my feedback from there. And that's sort of a way of letting them, again, have agency but also sort of meet their writing needs in an accessible way. And then I also really give a lot of, again, I teach online, so I'm very communicative in my online classes. I have daily sort of online lesson plans that I share with the whole class. In in-person classes, students create like a shared guidelines of how we'll discuss and speak on things in class. And there's just a bunch of tiny little moves that I do throughout my classes to make sure that access and agency are always at the forefront.

SW: I feel like conversations around access over the last few years pedagogically have been around participation and reconsidering what we mean by that or what it means to participate: assessment and alternative models for assessment, attendance policies, due dates, flexible due dates, and so on. Has there been something that has stood out to you more so than other threads and maybe something that has shifted in your own teaching?

KM: Yeah, so I am in a department where I have the freedom to do this. So I think about attendance a lot as a sort of one, and that seems like a very basic one, but I feel like the expectations for attendance really changed with the pandemic. And it's a change I'm not really a fan of because now when students are sick or when students aren't feeling good and they can't make it to class, they ask, hey, can I get a Zoom link and can you Zoom me into class or can I do this? And that's the place where I'm still working through tension because part of me is like, no, you're sick. Stay home, rest. You don't need to hop on a Zoom for this one single class session. You're going to be okay. And then another part of me is like, well, wouldn't it make the class more accessible if I did have these Zoom sessions offered for when people could not attend class? And so that's something that I'm still working through. That's not necessarily, I guess you said something that stuck out to me, because it is something I'm still working through. Like what does attendance mean in this postpandemic world where we obviously now are making ample use of these technologies like Zoom and other things and helping students maintain attendance in class? As far as just like attendance policies, and again, my department allows me to do this, I don't really have an attendance policy at all and nor do I really count attendance in any negative way towards students' participation. So when they're there, if they're participating, that's great. If they're not there, they're not going to receive any negative repercussions, but sort of figuring out how to accommodate attendance in accessible way is something I'm still working through.

SW: You're interested in multimodal pedagogies and digital writing as well. Have you found these questions around agency and access to complement, challenge, expand the work you do through multimodality and digital writing and if so, in what ways?

KM: Yeah, so I think that in my opinion, and this is kind of a biased opinion, I think that multimodal pedagogies and digital writing really complement accessibility and agency work. And that's part of because of the student audience I have. I do teach mostly exclusively freshmen, sophomores, so they're younger, they're very aware of technology, they use technology a lot. And so when I ask them to do an assignment that's like, oh, I want you to take a traditional essay that you wrote and transform it into a Twitter thread, for instance, they're like, yeah, I can definitely do that. And it helps them sort of see and understand how their writing can be accessible to larger audiences. It helps them think through questions of audience and things like that. Another assignment or option I've offered students before is to sort of create visual digital essays. So just sort of like a video essay where they'll be both speaking but also including visual elements.

And these are all obviously their technology, so students have to be aware and know how to use those technologies, but that's another place where I give students choice. So in every semester, regardless of what class I'm teaching, I always end the semester with a multimodal project where students just take something they already wrote in the semester and transform it into a new multimodal digital writing genre. And I do this so that students don't have to end the semester stressed out by like a really long paper. They get to do something sort of fun. But I also do this because I want them to end the semester seeing how could then their writing live beyond the classroom. And then I give them a choice of what they want to do. Some students do like Twitter threads, some students do podcast episodes, some students do video essays, I've had students create magazines, I've had students create zines in a smaller, more digital format and just sort of all sorts of creativity happens when you give students choice in digital writing. And so that's sort of the place where I create agency and access in digital writing because it helps them see their writing as more accessible outside the classroom, it helps give them choice in choosing how to do digital writing, and as a whole, I just think it makes the classroom a more accessible space. I'm just a huge advocate of technology. I know there are limitations. I'm from a rural area and I didn't have access to wifi until I was like 15 years old. So I know there are limitations with technology, but as a whole, I do think that it is really helpful to access and agency and helping in these situations of writing.

SW: Keshia, I know your teaching and research are also connected to queer and feminist rhetorics. Do you mind talking more about this work and how queer and feminist rhetorics shape your approach to teaching writing?

KM: Yeah, so queer and feminist rhetorics are sort of one of my major backgrounds. That's what I'm writing my dissertation in, much of my scholarship on, not only because of my own identities but also my own interest. And part of this is really just because when I read about teaching, the scholars who works really speak out to me are the teachers who are talking about writing or teaching writing in very queer ways, teaching writing in very feminist ways. Sort of a shout-out to my advisors, so for instance, Dr. Stacey Waite, who is my advisor, has this wonderful book called *Teaching Queer* that when I read it before I even got to UNL, it blew my mind because it

just talks about teaching in a way that just is so tangible and so deeply tied to identity, both your identities as the teacher and sort of cultivating identities in students no matter what those identities may be.

And she just had this wonderful philosophy about how teaching queer is about cultivating those identities. It doesn't have to be queer identities. It is just something that helps you understand, because as a queer person, which I am a queer person, your identity is always at the forefront. It's not something you can escape from, hide, and helping students understand their own identities in that way I think is just really powerful work. And I think it's especially powerful work in this sort of age of identity politics where we're kind of scared of identity politics and what they mean, but I actually think that part of the issue with identity politics is there aren't enough people who can articulate what their identities means to them, what it means to their learning, to their writing, and how it helps how they shape the world and see the world. And I think in queer and feminist teaching helps students sort of articulate that a little better and understand those identities better.

SW: Were there particular strategies in Stacey Waite's Teaching Queer or maybe just through conversations with other teachers that have helped you center queer rhetorics in concrete ways in the writing classroom? How do students respond to this approach?

KM: Again, that's another place where I think giving students sort of the agency of choice really comes into play. So another class that I've taught is writing an argument, and it's an argument class, so I do have students interrogate arguments. And one thing that I've particularly asked students to do is I've asked them to interrogate arguments or issues that hit close to home. Interrogate something that affects you in a deeply personal way. And that does require that students be a little bit vulnerable, but it also helps them think through their identity like, oh yeah, what issues are affecting my identity? What issues am I invested in? That I care about? And sometimes it is the larger sort of more controversial political issues like abortion or trans rights and sometimes it's more like local stuff. I've had students think about the policies for deaf students at our university and how that affected them because they're partially deaf. And then I've had students think about the cost of certain medical supplies because one of their parents had like a diabetes.

Just thinking about their identities and what they care about through these sort of assignments that allowed them to explore that and connect their identities to the larger world. Well, one thing is I do give students sort of an out. I tell them it doesn't have to be the thing that affects you the most, it just has to be something that affects you. So if you don't feel like you're emotionally prepared to interrogate a certain policy or law, etc, you don't have to do that. You could do something simple. For instance, our university is a Coke campus instead of a Pepsi campus, so you could interrogate that if you're like a Pepsi fangirl or something like that. So that's one of the ways that I help students is you do have an out, you don't have to do the deepest things, but for the most part, honestly, students are really responsive to it.

I would say about anywhere from 80 to 90% of students every semester, I do a lot of things like conferences and checks ins with my students, asking them what are you enjoying about the class? And so often the reprieve is, I am enjoying that I get to talk about things I care about. I am enjoying that I get to talk about myself and my life because none of my other classes give me the

opportunity to do so. There is occasionally a student who's like, I don't really care about anything or I don't want to talk about myself or I'm not important, but that is such a small number that it feels like it's still worth doing for all the many other students who are enjoying the work.

SW: This is my last question. Can you talk more about your research on queer literacies in the rural south?

KM: Okay, so that research is actually my dissertation project and has also been a couple other smaller projects I've done leading up to the dissertation. So as I've sort of identified throughout the podcast, I am a queer person. I'm also a queer person who grew up in the rural south. And so I have a very self-centered, selfish dissertation project because I am exploring what does queer literacy in the rural south look like? I'm doing this not only through a sort of ethnography reflection of my own identities, but also through an extensive oral history project where I've recruited and interviewed 20+ participants from the rural south and asked them about their experiences with queer literacy. And by queer literacy, I sort of mean what does it mean to come to know and become a queer person? What type of vocabularies do you need? What are the identity markers do you need? Gay, trans, lesbian? But also sort of what social performances does it require? And also sort of like just what does it mean to build queer self, to build queer community? And I've already done all those interviews. I've also created a digital oral history project alongside it so that way my dissertation will live sort of beyond the pages of my writing. And I'm currently sort of drafting that dissertation. And in this, I'm just finding a lot of really important work, again, about access. So I sort of started this project with sort of the intention of it's going to be a project about queer literacy and how people come to understand and know queer literacy. But a big theme that has emerged has been access and how people can't actually practice queer literacy if they don't have access. And it's from my dissertation that I've sort of really contextualize what I talked about in the beginning with thinking about access of like what are the material needs that need to be met versus what are the intellectual, spiritual, emotional needs that need to be met?

And for queer people, material needs are going to change shape based on where you're at. And people in the rural south in particular very much lack in material needs because of laws and policies, because of just the realities of geographic limitations, like they're nowhere near resources for queer people. But then there's also the case of, again, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs because some of these people were raised in rural communities that were actually very supportive of their queer identities. Others were raised in rural communities where their queer identities were just immediately shamed, they had some really violent things happening to them. And so I've been thinking about access in this project and what does like sort of queer access look like for queer people in the rural south and what does that mean for how they become queer through acquisition and learning of queer literacy? And that is an ongoing project. I have mostly drafted it now, but of course, as many people know, a dissertation draft is not the dissertation and it's probably going to go through a lot more revision before it gets done.

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