

Episode 68: Kim Fahle Peck

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Kim Fahle Peck about teaching online, strategies for overcoming challenges to synchronous teaching, HyFlex models, redefining community in online teaching, and multimodal writing center practices.

Kim Fahle Peck is the Writing Center Director at York College of Pennsylvania, where she coordinates writing tutoring, a writing fellows program, and teaches courses on writing, writing centers and writing pedagogy. Her scholarship focuses on writing centers, online writing instruction, and technology mediation in writing instruction. Her dissertation "Collaboration and Community in Undergraduate Writing Synchronous Video Courses (SVCs)" won the 2019 Computers and Composition Hugh Burns Dissertation Award. She is currently serving as a facilitator for the Basic OLI Certification for the Global Society of Online Literacy Educators and is a co-editor of *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric*.

Kim, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Let's start by talking about your experiences teaching synchronous online classes. What's your approach to teaching synchronously and what are your pedagogical aims or emphases when you teach online?

KFP: I'll first start by saying that I kind of fell into this because I experienced synchronous online classes as a student. I was starting a PhD at Old Dominion University and before that I had never taken an online class ever. I went to a small liberal arts college. My Master's was like traditional graduate seminars where we sit around and talk about readings, but I was in a position that a lot of students that take online classes are in, I had a full-time job. So online education let me actually pursue my education. My very first class that I took as a PhD student was a synchronous online class. It was with Shelley Rodrigo, who's now at the University of Arizona. It was just a fantastic class. We had super engaging discussions, both verbally and on the chat. I felt like I got to know my classmates.

I was like, "Oh, this is a thing and it can be done really well." I consider myself really lucky because I know a lot of people now are experiencing this for the first time having just gotten kind of thrown in. So they don't necessarily have kind of that model, but I did. And I think for me, those experiences as a student have really shaped my pedagogical approaches. For me, the kind of grounding is just activity – that if we're going to be sharing time together, we're going to be doing things together.

The students don't need to sit and listen to me. I could record a video and they could watch it whenever. We're going to do stuff together, not just discussion, but writing and composing kind of when we're actually sharing time together. I think, too, another kind of grounding idea for me for synchronous teaching is flexibility. That's not necessarily different for face-to-face, but again, this kind of...if I'm meeting with students synchronously that this is like sacred time that you wouldn't have had in another online situation.

So if I'm realizing that students are confused or that they might need some more information about something, like it doesn't matter what I plan to do that day, we're going to use the time in the way that kind of works best for them, and stuff happens. Zoom cuts out, their internet changes. The need to be flexible and roll with the punches, I think is just so crucial to synchronous classes and just setting that for everyone that I'm going to be like that with my students and I'm hoping they'll be like that for me if my internet cuts out or something goes wrong. I think, in terms of some of those kind of big principles, that idea of just activity, flexibility, and then empathy for those things that can go wrong.

SW: What have been some of the most challenging aspects of teaching synchronously online for you, and what strategies have you found to be helpful in overcoming those challenges?

KFP: Yeah, so I think what's most challenging for a lot of people in this environment is trying to facilitate engagement and connection. I think this is what people are really struggling with right now who are doing it for the first time. There isn't a huge body of research on synchronous teaching, but that which does exist actually does point to this challenge. A lot of it is people lamenting the difficulty of just having free flowing conversation or long awkward silences as part of this. This is definitely something that I've experienced as a teacher and I've seen in my research.

One thing that I think can work with this kind of stiltedness sometimes and the awkward silences is actually just a simple strategy of calling directly on students. Sometimes teachers feel really weird about that and they don't want to do that, but when I advocate that I'm not necessarily saying cold call on students or using it as like a "gotcha" strategy to see if they're listening, but more as a way that you were orchestrating the conversation because on a video conference, students may be a little nervous to speak up because of the microphone, there's a little bit more distancing, so they might feel less pressure to speak.

Or sometimes students just are afraid to interrupt each other. They don't have the same visual cues of who's about to speak. So it just causes this reticence but you calling students directly it can help them avoid that and navigate that. For myself, how I've used this strategy in my teaching and tutoring class that I'm teaching this semester, I start every class where students are posting on a collaborative whiteboard space. They have to share one thing that stood out to them from the readings. One question they had from the readings and one connection to other course concepts or other experiences that they've had. I use those responses to orchestrate our

conversation later. So as it comes up, I'll ask someone to elaborate on what they put on that initial post and explain what they were thinking.

So again, I'm orchestrating the conversation or in a studio class that I'm teaching that is a support class for first year experience class, we, just last night were talking about how to approach assignment prompts. We were using Corrine Hinton's chapter from *Writing Spaces* and in the chapter, she talks about looking for directive verbs. So explain, analyze, and she has a whole list of them. I told all of them to pick three of the verbs from the list and write a definition or what they thought it meant. Then we went through and I asked each student one by one to tell the class one of the verbs that they chose and how they understood it. Everybody knew they were going to get called on to speak, knew that kind of expectation. So it avoids some of that Ferris Bueller asking question, "Anyone, anyone," kind of thing that can happen. I think that is one of the challenges I think not recognizing that there are lots of ways to engage besides verbal discussion.

SW: What technologies do you use or incorporate when you teach online?

KFP: I'm at Google Campuses. I use a lot of Google products. So we're collaborating in Google Docs. I'll have maybe Google Slides with empty slides that students need to work together and fill in posting initial thoughts for the readings. I'm using Google Jamboard for that. So they're posting sticky notes with those ideas. Google works really well for me because all the students have access to it. I try to not go overboard and introduce too many technologies. Because I think, there's so many tools that can do so many things, but I try to stay within our video conference platform, Google or our LMS so that I'm not asking students to learn too many things.

Especially right now when they are trying to navigate so many new things that actually trying to keep the technology on the lower side, even though it's online, there's an online component to that. Now sometimes I have to step outside or do some things. Like for instance, I'm teaching HyFlex class...I had experience teaching synchronously, but I'd never had to teach HyFlex before. I don't have everyone in the video conference platform. So if I want to do a poll, I can't necessarily just use the poll in Zoom. I'll use something like Poll Everywhere, which can embed right into my Google Slides. I try to look for and find tools that are easily embedded into the technologies that we're already using.

SW: I'm really curious as to what your experience has been like in this HyFlex model.

KFP: It's hard, it's really hard. I think that the balancing act that you're trying to do, I'm trying so hard to give equal attention to the students in the classroom and the students who are joining virtually. When I'm doing that, I'm trying to navigate the screen and the sharing screen on Zoom so that the students on Zoom are seeing things, but I also have to navigate this projector in the room. For instance, if I want to pause the sharing, so they're working on something, I have to pause it on Zoom and I have to pause it in the room. If students are using the chat feature in Zoom and have a private chat for me, I have to be careful of when I check it and look so that it's

not projected to the students in the classroom so I'm not accidentally sharing a student's confidence when that wasn't my intention.

I read an article when I was doing my research on this for my dissertation by Sarah Cornelius, who talked about synchronous online, being a demanding environment. And I think that's true, even if everyone is in the video conference that you're keeping track of different tabs, the verbal channel, the text channel. But I think when you add the HyFlex kind of into that, it's just a, kind of another layer. So yeah, it's difficult and it can be done. But I think that issue of equal access and trying to equally engage students in both places is very difficult.

SW: So you mentioned your dissertation research and your dissertation examined student and teacher interactions and their sense of community in online synchronous classes. Can you talk more about that research and what stood out to you as you were listening to teachers and students talk about their experiences and interactions in online environments?

KFP: I was looking at three synchronous online classes. One was completely virtual. Everyone is joining through the video conference and then the other two were actually these HyFlex and they were different levels. One of them was a first-year writing class. One of them was in advanced composition. One of them was digital writing. One thing that I found as I was looking at all of these is that it was actually pretty difficult to make generalizations because the type of course, the level of student, the kind of modality definitely changed up what ended up occurring in terms of interaction and student and teacher experience. But I definitely did find examples of what people worry about of this kind of stilted or kind of difficult engagement. I was looking at discourse patterns in across these classes and for a lot of them, the major verbal discourse pattern was the IRF pattern.

So the teacher initiates, student responds, the instructor provides feedback to that instruction and then repeat. It is a much more kind of student instructor question-answer pattern versus a more kind of dialogic or student to student kind of interaction. I did see examples of more of that kind of student to student when students had the opportunity to give real, like authentic feedback to each other, that it wasn't just a conversation about writing concepts. So one class that I was observing, they were meeting and talking after they had completed peer review and they were talking more about expectations for their papers and questions that they had and getting a chance to look at pieces of each other's writing and offer questions or suggestions. That was one of the few times that there was actually dialogue between students, but even so a lot of times it still was orchestrated by the instructor because I think that is just one of the features of the video conference is that's a role that the instructor just needs to take more of than maybe in the face-to-face classroom that you need to help indicate who should speak next or follow up and kind of like a conductor of an orchestra pulling all the pieces together.

In terms of experiences and sense of community. One of the challenges in asking that, and I realized first, what do we mean by community? We're always talking about community as this thing that we're searching for, but we don't often actually have a specific definition or a clear set

of how we're going to measure that. So that was one big part of my project that I had to do was actually try to define and operationalize how I was actually going to approach community.

I looked at a lot of different definitions, both within and beyond the field. So discourse community, speech communities, virtual communities, communities of practice, communities of inquiry. I ended up focusing on three key elements in terms of looking at them in synchronous online. I was looking at access and autonomy relationships and interaction. I've talked some about interaction and some of this issue of more kind of IRF type patterns, but in terms of relationships or sense of that, it was split and it depended on students' kind of context.

There were several students who shared that they appreciated actually getting to see and hear their instructor. It felt more like what they expected of a classroom, same with being able to see their classmates, that the video conference functioned as a facsimile of a classroom. And so they derived some comfort from that and felt connected in the shared experience with that.

But then I think there were other students who felt like maybe they had unequal access to the instructor or that they just felt like they got to know a small group. Like, so the group that maybe was taking the class in the same physical location, is that more in the same modality. There were these almost micro communities that were developed. So that was just very interesting to me. I think I've been thinking about that more as I've been teaching this HyFlex class, is this concept of are we aiming for a community for our whole class? Is it okay to have some of these more micro communities, and what might be the value of that? I think that's something that I think we just need to continue to explore and continue to make sure we're actually thinking about what do we mean when we say community and how do we decide if that was achieved or not from a student perspective or from a faculty perspective.

SW: Defining and/or redefining community seems like a really important step to teaching online. I've talked with a lot of teachers who are teaching in hybrid asynchronous and synchronous environments, so they're teaching once a week via Zoom and they're having a really difficult time building that community or that sense of community. In part because they want to respect privacy and student agency in terms of participation. I'm thinking about how that word – participation – is probably one of the first things we think about when we talk about “community” through teaching writing.

KFP: It is, and it's a really interesting challenge right now because I think that there are just such interesting conversations related to autonomy, privacy, and community that don't have easy answers because yes, there is something that happens when we can see each other's faces and even something that can potentially happen when we can see each other's backgrounds that I've been doing some follow up research with Kevin DePew from Old Dominion. We've been specifically looking at this, the influence of student's environments that they participate from in synchronous online classes. One of the threads we've seen is that students actually really enjoy getting to see other people, where they choose to participate from, that actually can be also

something that can help develop community and relationships because you're getting a window into who they are and some information, but of course there are real privacy issues there too.

We can't divorce this from issues of class, race, gender, et cetera. So there are no easy answers for thinking about this. And I think, as teachers, when we're coming to this, we're often thinking about, "Okay, what makes us feel like we are getting to know our students and having community there?" But I think we also have to think about, "Okay, for the students, what do they need to be able to feel connected and engaged?" Those two things might not line up depending on the context that they're in and the kind of experience that they have.

I know for myself, I love when I can see my students on video and get a chance to talk with them that way. But there might be real reasons that my students choose to not put their videos on for class. I try to have there be options for different ways that they can engage in the class and participate that don't require them to have their camera on. But it is, I think, this is something we're all really trying to navigate right now. And it was different when I started my research because these classes that I was looking at when synchronous was more of a fringe kind of practice, that there was the requirement and expectation for students to have cameras on because they had elected to take courses in this modality.

But now we're in a situation where many students are taking courses in this modality when they would not have chosen to do so in other circumstances. So can we or should we require them to essentially be disclosing aspects of themselves that they wouldn't have chosen to do otherwise? I personally land on "no." I don't require cameras to be on when I teach. I very much understand why people want to and why people feel more connected when they're able to see their students. But especially right now, when what we're doing is so far field from where we thought we would be, I think that we have to be flexible and we do have to meet students where they are and think about what are their needs, because what they're looking for in community and relationship might not actually line up to what we think we would like as teachers.

SW: You're the Director of the Writing Center at York College of Pennsylvania. Your teaching embraces multimodal pedagogy and practices. How does a multimodal approach to teaching writing influence or inform, or potentially even intersect with the kinds of practices you value and use in the writing center?

KFP: I'll say it actually might start the relationship going in the other direction. I think that a lot of my teaching has been influenced by my experience in the writing center. So having worked as a tutor, and so the kind of flexibility that I think is central to writing center pedagogy of trying different strategies, using different modes to help connect ideas and engage students. That was something that I learned as a writing center tutor and brought forward with me when I then started teaching. So it does influence back to how I try to frame my writing center. We used to have this giant table and the writing center filled with all kinds of highlighters, post-its, scissors, all kinds of things. And tutors were really encouraged to engage with all of these things in ways that we're not just talking about the paper or just writing on the paper, but draw a map of

concepts or create highlighter codes in the paper with the student to create a visual map of something, cut the paper up and see kind of what happens when you move things around.

I think now we're trying to think about how do we replicate that online? What are some of the ways that we can do that? And also just recognizing that different modes might connect students in different ways. So for instance, one of the things that we're doing for our asynchronous tutoring this semester is that all students get not only text-based feedback, but also an accompanying screencast comment from the student that is providing an overall explanation or delving deeper into one of their comments with the idea that hopefully this flexible approach of offering multiple ways of getting feedback will allow whichever one works best for the student to be available to them.

Wanting to provide a lot of flexibility and a buffet of options for students, but also not overwhelming tutors or students with too many technologies, too many options. I think that is always the challenge of that balancing act because you do want to meet students where they are, give them the type of support and feedback that's going to work best for them, but trying to have a million different options makes it hard to train tutors to do that well, to have them feel confident about using those. And so always trying to balance simplicity with flexibility.

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