

## Episode 48: Kristi Prins and Jason Luther

### Transcript

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

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In this episode, I talk with Kristi Prins and Jason Luther about craft, materiality, multimodal pedagogies and practices, and the advantages of incorporating zines, podcasts, and other DIY projects in the writing classroom.

This conversation was recorded in December 2019.

Kristin Prins is an Assistant Professor in rhetoric and composition at Cal Poly Pomona. She helped to open CPP's library Maker Studio in fall 2019 and coordinates the campus' first-year writing program. Her research and teaching span DIY/craft and multimodal rhetoric and composing, feminist and activist rhetorics, and writing pedagogy and program administration. Her work has appeared in *Kairos*, *Harlot*, the *Digital Rhetoric Collaborative*, and edited collections.

Jason Luther's research focuses on multimodal (counter)publics and DIY participatory media. His work has most recently appeared in *Community Literacy Journal*, *SoundEffects*, and the *Digital Rhetoric Collaborative*. He is Assistant Professor of Writing Arts at Rowan University where he teaches about self-publishing, digital and multimodal composition, rhetorical theory, and sound writing. Luther is also the co-founder of Syracuse in Print and is currently a public scholar for the New Jersey Council for the Humanities.

Kristi and Jason, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: Let's start by talking about DIY culture, craft, and materiality. I think perhaps, maybe naturally when people see or hear the word, "the writing classroom," they think about the alphabetic text or privileging assigning writing and assessing the alphabetic text. The term "composition," of course, has broader appeal and captures the different kinds of meaning-making processes that happen in the writing classroom. I'm thinking about multimodal pedagogies and practices specifically, and the affordances of multimodal pedagogies and practices. Do you mind talking about what it means to embrace a DIY approach to the writing classroom?*

KP: I got into this, I got interested in multimodal composing and then craft and DIY because of the ways in which people expected to be bad at first and that failure could be fun. And so for me,

it is in part very much about getting students to start embracing this kind of ethic of experimentation and being willing to fail and learning how to enjoy process in ways that just were really, really difficult to get students to embrace with alphanumeric text and to bring that spirit of experimentation and community building that happens around making. Students saw that as much more inherently collaborative than they felt like writing could or should be.

In my teaching, it is kind of less about the kinds of things students end up making and more about an approach to how do we enter into this assignment, how do we enter into working with this new kind of software or this new kind of physical materiality or materials. It's about helping students develop a sense of self-efficacy, learning how to figure stuff out without having completely detailed step-by-step instructions for how to make a perfect looking thing.

And more about helping students develop this sense of I can get in there and I can figure it out. And then an important part is also thinking about these kinds of social and ethical dimensions of ultimately what we make, how they're going to circulate, how they're going to impact or influence those that it circulates to, not just you can have a DIY approach that you're making zines, where you're making websites just using HTML and CSS or something. But for me, it's more about the ways that I'm asking students to work, the ways that I'm asking to interact with each other, and the ways that I'm asking them to think about what they produce is going to do in the world.

For me, one of the most important things is that it looks like a space where you can make your terrible thing and point at it and say, "Here's what I learned while I was making it. And look, it's awful." And people are excited and laughing and supportive of that. And to get students to do that with essay writing, for example, it would be like a dream. I've never been able to start there. I think getting to DIY and craft first helps to make that make sense.

JL: Yeah, I would agree with a lot of what Kristi said, especially in terms of how that process and those failures draw attention to aspects of composition that aren't typically highlighted through that alphabetic process, whether it's because of schooling, punishment and submission, whatever you want to blame that on. I think when students are making something, it calls attention to the labor practices of it, it calls attention to what is available, including literacies, like what literacies are available to you, sources, what texts are available to you, what can you hack, what can you turn something into that isn't designed a certain way to make the thing that you want. I think all of those things are sort of important cause I'm trying to really think, like the processes are really different depending on the thing. I teach podcasting in a really short class, it has eight classes in an intro course here at Rowan, that's taught with three faculty and we have 60 students and we break those 60 to 20, and we basically rotate them through eight class periods over the courses of the semester.

So in order to highlight multimodality in that class, I'm trying to teach them how to podcast in eight class periods. It's not a lot of time for an intro freshman course. So I have to adjust what I'm asking from them. And they have to sort of give me their best shot at Audacity, for example, and

all its complications. But like when I'm making zines in self-publishing, which is a totally different class, a totally different group of students, but what's available is really different there as well. Like we do have a copy machine, but I have to use my copy code to get them into it. And that came with all sorts of complications that semester.

But part of it too is what I want to say about DIY that I think is really interesting is that it's a complicated...and I'm simplifying here, but there's two versions of it, right? There's DIY that comes from radical activist, alternative media. And then there's DIY that has come from, and maybe even been gentrified by an entrepreneurial neoliberal version of DIY that still embraces, things like failure but that sort of supplements, voice for economic survival or profit. I think that's what makes DIY so interesting. Like would you consider an alt-right YouTuber a DIY, having embraced the DIY ethos? I mean, they're making do with what they can, but they exist within this ecosystem of targeted advertising and other sorts of problematic circulation. And so I'm really interested in how DIY is not the pure term that we often think it is.

*SW: It sounds like a DIY approach to teaching writing brings a critical awareness to the composing process, as well as other elements like audience. And it seems to me, at least, that it also calls us to a deeper consideration of ethics.*

JL: Striving for a DIY composition means trying to be attentive to who benefits from what sort of arrangements. And let's see, collaborations, the nature of the spaces themselves and how you make them. So for example, is one's Twitter account maintaining, is that a DIY composition? Who's benefiting from taking up that space alone, versus Kristi's example of learning, how to code an HTML space, a domain that you own, but are still using a Microsoft or Apple computer, requiring data centers that are using polluted water or polluting water. Calling attention in some ways to students to the circuits of production and distribution, I think is what DIY can do. Oftentimes what I encounter with students here is a real consumptive...I teach a class on fake news or digital culture. And a lot of times a lot of students' fall back is to go to this consumptive mode of digital culture and trying to incorporate participation, but participation that's thoughtful and ethical that tries to get them the closest to the means of production that they own as possible.

*SW: When writing teachers incorporate zines, podcasts, they're inviting more expansive conversation to happen about culture and communities and texts. Some of these genres are even intentionally counter-culture and counter academia, or counter the traditional texts and maybe genre expectations that circulate and that are often valued in academia. I imagine this really opens up the classroom to some dynamic conversations about production and circulation and distribution and meaning-making. What advantages have you noticed about incorporating these genres, like zines, and inviting DIY conversations in the classroom?*

KP: For me, one of the most interesting things that happened this semester for the first time I got to teach a multimodal literacy class, kind of a sophomore level class but it's in our new minor in writing studies. So it's about half English majors and half all other majors. And I didn't really think about it and I probably should have, but kind of at the last minute I decided, you know

what, I'll have the regular syllabus that looks like all the other syllabus they get, that'll be policies clearly laid out, et cetera, and I'm going to do a zine version and like a mini-zine, it's not going to fit everything. So I kind of distributed both of them. And we looked at the zine version first and then we looked at the kind of traditional version that was a PDF I was projecting on a screen.

And the conversation that we ended up having was about how the two different documents made them feel. From my perspective, it led to this really interesting discussion about the kind of corporate professionalism we're always encouraging students to develop and how sterile that is and how unquestioning of capitalist, hierarchical, patriarchal dynamic structures and how really white and middle-class a lot of those values are. Had I thought about this for weeks, I could not have planned a better opening conversation for that class. It was this impulse I had that worked out really well, really questioning what are the kind of cultural values that we have in academia? Who do those serve? Almost invisible to students, oftentimes ways in which what seems normal in higher education doesn't have to be, but it's really naturalizing a lot of things that we want to question. But when we do that with the same old materials, it makes that seem really disingenuous, I think.

JL: We were talking about labor a little bit earlier. I think that each project has a different kind of labor to it. So zines, for example, the labor is into the production of the thing. Like a lot of students struggle with a folio paginated, like how a page will enforce its publication has to be in floors and it has to be arranged in a certain way. Once it gets folded and mass produced, or they even just struggle with mass production, like they don't realize sometimes that color is going to not show up in a photocopy. So all of those struggles are kind of upfront, but then when I teach it, we usually do an event. And when students are giving out and circulating their texts, that's the fun, rewarding part. This class I'm referring to is a self-publishing elective here at Rowan.

It's a new class, part of the Publishing and Writing for the Public concentration that we have. And soon to be minor, we hope. When they do crowdfunding or they're looking into the world of authorpreneurship or working in the world of basically Amazon self-publishing, they realized very quickly that the labor is in the attention economy. How do you get your work to stand out? And you have to really hustle on all these sort of pro corporate tools, social media, Kickstarter. Wherever you are, you have to sort of hustle. And there's a different kind of labor, even though the ideas are the same, trying to craft your own space in the world. So I think one of the advantages is trying to make compromises. Negotiating. They might come in with this idea, but they realize very quickly that the means of production, or the means of circulation are limited, or are going to require a certain amount of labor or capital for it to happen.

And so they sometimes...like maybe you have all these poems that you like, and you want to self-publish them. But if you're doing a Kickstarter on it, if you don't have a story or a narrative that people can grasp right away, then that's going to be a harder sell. So you can stay true to your form and make it like a hodgepodge of poetry. Or you can really think what's the through line and try to make it as a better pitch. Or maybe it's even better for the uptake, the market at the time, which might feel like selling out. But at the same time, it gets your work in the world.

So those kinds of compromises, or like students want to make a 24 page zine, but they don't have the money. They have to make a 12 page zine, or they have to make it smaller. Those are all economic choices that they're not simpatico with the original idea that they pitched. So in that project, they are constantly revisiting those goals because it's not like you just have this idea and voila, it happens through hard work. It's often these compromises that are happening and failures, as Kristi mentioned along the way.

KP: Yeah, and Jason, what you were saying also makes me think, it feels a lot of the time when I talk to students about, especially English majors, why this major, for example. And there is the sense where there are corners of academia that are clean, or there are ways of being in the world that are clean and self-publishing, or going through some kind of sustainable publishing practices for lots of reasons, objectively better than going some other routes. But at the end, having your hands in those production processes like you were talking about Jason, like it really, I think, helps students to see everything really is an ethical decision.

DIY clearly has not, and will not save us. It'll get corporatized. Maker fairs will spring up all over the place. There are all these cycles of consumption that get built around things that we would like to think are somehow pure and clean, but the history of DIY and the history of craft demonstrate that that's not real. And I think getting really close to some of these production practices, writing or composition classrooms can make some of those connections between the academic and what's personally important to students really obvious and material in ways that are really helpful.

*SW: So beyond the conversations that this kind of work helps produce, like talking about resistance and privilege, consumerism, capitalism, distribution, and so on. There's also perhaps this kind of teaching that happens around the actual materiality. I imagine some students, if not most, are unfamiliar with some of the texts that they are being asked to make. Can you talk about students' reactions and perceptions?*

JL: Yeah, I'll say that I've never taught zines or any sort of DIY...I haven't taught first-year writing actually in a long time. So I haven't really tried this with students who are in a compulsory situation, I guess I should say. But at the same time, I will say every time we enter into a kind of wacky project, like zine making, students are struggling. I'm like, "Okay, this is the time where the plane crashes they aren't going to go so well." And they struggle. Even down to like, "Oh, I'll be here at the copy machine to help you." Then they get there and I'm like, "Oh, the prototypes they made are not probably the best." And I'm struggling with them with the copier, or they went and spent money that they don't have on making copies.

We did an actual book festival this year. It's the largest book festival in the Delaware Valley. We got a table for it. And my class, I had 14 students, all but one represented their zines at the table. 10 of them of 14 came that day and sold them at the table. Now I've done zine events before, but only on campus. So it felt a little bit more risky going out in the public and the students, they

were going to, they were supposed to create sort of like a pre-contracted, pre-pitch for the zine. And even though they wrote it, we just got so busy with planning the table cause the logistics of like, "Well, how do we set the pricing?" Like when I've done zine events everyone had their own table, but now we're sharing a table.

So we really had to think about how do we market ourselves. Do we want to do bundles? How do we make the facilitation of cash easier? Did we take Venmo? All these things. It was just like, "Oh yeah, I didn't think about those things enough as an instructor," but it was probably the most meaningful part of the whole semester for us, just sitting in a circle, really thinking these things through. And then when it came to their reflective piece at the end, a lot of them talked about those struggles, and they're not going to make another zine.

They've said, "No, I'm not going to make issue two. But I learned a lot from this process." And I think what it reminds me of is how powerful it is when students are given an opportunity to create their own space with a little bit of scaffolding, they can do it. I mean, you can't just say, "Do this thing. I don't care what it is. We'll see what happens." But you can say, "Let's create this thing within some of these parameters, and I'm here to help you be as successful as you can." And they make their own thing. I think we underestimate how powerful that is.

KP: Yes, to everything you just said. For me, when I first introduced like, okay, we're going to do something that doesn't immediately sound like something you think you should be doing in an English class, I do get a lot of anxiety, principally. They're really worried about what the criteria for grading is going to be, period. And they haven't made something like this before and they are still so in that mindset of something needing to be highly polished. With essays, students are used, I think to a pretty perfunctory process, first draft, best draft. Even with a highly scaffolded kind of invention and revision sections of an assignment, there's I think a lot of short cutting that they've learned how to do, which is good and helpful, right? Like who could get through the first year of college without those shortcuts. To put in the time and the attention at each step as though it's unfamiliar this time because it actually is I think is kind of surprising.

And my students are overwhelmingly...this is a commuter campus. Most of our students work at multiple part-time jobs. A lot of them are trying to work full-time and go to school full time and have family responsibilities and all of the realities about college these days. These are students with really complicated lives. So I understand why they are hesitant to really just say, "I'm going to give this amount of time to focusing on this." One of the things that I think surprises them and surprised me when I started doing it was just that because they had to put in some really focused time, undistracted time in their projects, it was a new learning and working space for them. That was a really surprising bonus.

JL: I'd like to talk to you more about this actually because one of the things I'm learning is, when I was at Syracuse and didn't have a computer lab, but now I'm privileged enough to teach in a computer lab, every class...I think pedagogies that come with that are really different. I don't think people in our field talk about that at all. And partially because who gets a computer lab

every time? But this is a huge challenge, and what I'm learning because our students have the same kinds of material challenges that Kristi's describing at Cal Poly, they need time, they need time to work. So I've been trying to be more thoughtful in planning my schedule between let's say Tuesday to Thursday, there was no homework, but Thursday to Tuesday, there might be, but in class they need that time to work.

I think they'll do homework if it's thoughtfully planned, but they really need time to create because of what they're worried about in that question, I think when you throw them a wacky project is like, "I don't have time to not have certainty. Things need to be planned. I need to be able to schedule my life in such a way that I don't have this free flex time to hope things work out." And of course grades are the looming threat. And that's such a big thing. So most of my response has been trying to assuage their fears about the grades and being like, "Trust me, just trust me. We'll work together. We'll get you through this." But there is this part of unstructured labor that is privileged.

KP: Yeah, these projects do often...students will come back and say, "I'd spent the most time out of any of my say final projects this semester. This is what took the most time." Often it's time that they were at least partially happy to spend. Cause it's something kind of different from what their other classes are asking from them. I do think a part of this kind of teaching necessarily needs to be giving students some structured, essentially like studio workshop time in class because they don't have lives that afford three hours of trial and error on this new thing that I'm working on. I tell them I kind of don't care if it's ugly or broken or doesn't live up to your polished intentions. I'm really interested in how and why you made the decisions you made. So for me, this comes back to rhetoric really deeply every time.

And for me, these projects are really nice places where some of those rhetorical concepts that feel kind of proforma in essay writing or any alphanumeric writing becomes much more, really meaningful for students because they're focused on audiences that I don't know a whole lot about. So they have to really explain the values of a subculture that I'm unaware of because that's the audience for this thing. And here's why the decisions that I made in composing this are smart decisions for that audience. So I do get to see little corners of their lives and parts of culture that I never would have known anything about otherwise. So on that front, it is that kind of selfish, like I'm learning so much alongside you.

*SW: Thanks, Kristi and Jason. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.*