

Episode 90: Kristin Lacey

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

The purpose of Pedagogue is to promote diverse voices at various institutions and help foster community and collaboration among teachers of writing. Each episode is a conversation with a teacher (or multiple teachers) about their experiences teaching writing, their work, inspirations, assignments, assessments, successes, and challenges. If you would like to learn more about the podcast, visit us online pedagoguepodcast.com. If you're interested in coming on the podcast, please fill out the [contact form](#) on the site.

In this episode, I talk with Kristin Lacey about building community and fostering student agency, teaching reading, queer American literature, and transitioning to graduate school.

Kristin Lacey is a PhD candidate in English at Boston University, where she teaches English and composition courses. Kristin is passionate about teaching and supporting students, especially first-generation college students. Her dissertation, *The Ambition Revolution: Gender and the Pursuit of Success in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Fiction*, studies the rise of individual ambition from the 1840s to early 1900s with particular attention to women's strategic navigation of this cultural shift. To learn more about her work, visit kristinlacey.com and follow her on Twitter @kristin_a_lacey.

Kristin, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your teaching and research focus on building community and fostering student agency in the writing classroom. I'm wondering what kinds of strategies, activities, or practices you use to help you do this work, to help build community? And how do you encourage students to take ownership in their learning?

KL: A lot of my best class activities actually come from other teachers on Twitter or teachers I've loved to have as a student. A lot of the time, I think of teaching as altruistic theft, right? So, I'll go through the activities and the order that I usually raise them in a semester. I usually start with a name test, and this is an idea I got from Johanna Winant on Twitter. I require students to know each other's names. Instead of suggesting that that would be a good thing to do, I actually require them to take written tests. So, I will tell them on the first day, "One thing that I expect of you is that you will take these name tests in the next class sessions on your fellow classmates' names."

And then, so the next class time, I'll often come in and they'll see me and go into a slight panic because they'll remember, "Oh no, I need to know people's names." I've had students suggest like, "Let's set up a Google Doc where we put our pictures and names," things like that. It kind of just builds a little camaraderie immediately, which I like. So, then I just kind of stand behind a student and have the other students write their name, go around in a circle and then I grade them,

give them back. And usually, by the second or third time, everyone gets everyone's name. So, it's just a great way for building community early on and a little bit of fun also.

Usually, at the second class, I do something that my undergrad mentor, Samina Najmi, at Fresno State did which helped me a lot as a pretty quiet student myself. She asks all the students in her class, "What are some assumptions people make about quiet students?" And then she encourages them to share them whether they're positive or negative and they don't even need to claim that assumption. You'll hear, "They didn't pay attention, they didn't do the reading, they're bored, they don't care." But you'll also hear, "They're anxious, they're shy, they're reticent to speak up." And what Samina did was say, "Our culture values super expressive, loud participation, but that's not everyone's forte."

And so, I just use that activity as a way to say, "I value whatever participation you can muster, whether that's paying attention, making eye contact, writing good notes." And that usually actually provides some cover for quiet students to develop the courage and competence to speak up more often. And then, as far as building in student agency over the classroom, I introduce pretty early on a Post-it check-in if we're in person, and a Google form check-in if we're online. And that's just a way for students to give anonymous feedback to me in a short amount of space so it's not particularly daunting, about what's going well for them in class and what they need more help on.

So, you might get something like, "I need more help on figuring out what passive voice is, how to make my writing into active voice," or, "This particular discussion format is helpful for me," or, "There's too much reading," which is frequent in my classes because I always get a little too excited. So then, I can tailor the rest of the syllabus, the rest of my in class time to what they need and acknowledge that I've read what they've said to me. And finally, I love to do a meme slideshow at the end. About a week before the end of class, I told students make memes about the class. And those vary from memes about the content to memes about inside jokes that had run through throughout the course. Yeah, those are some of the activities I use.

SW: I really like the Post-it note idea where you ask students to reflect on their learning and the course. As a writing teacher, you're getting a better sense of the classroom and your curriculum, and how students are interacting with it. You mentioned assigning a lot of reading, too. I know that your teaching and research are situated in 19th century American literature. How do you teach reading and encourage students to deeply engage with texts?

KL: That's a great question. In all my classes, I usually start by asking students what they already know and are coming in with about the topic. They always come in with experiences and knowledge that inform their approach to the subject, whether those are previous encounters with a text or a gut level loathing of *The Scarlet Letter* from high school or a fascination with Emily Dickinson. Students in my 19th century American lit class, in particular, were the most excited by the transcendentalists, which shouldn't have surprised me as much as it did, given that their interest in self-actualization, living in the moment, two concepts that college students are pretty familiar with.

But my primary goal in teaching 19th century lit was to complicate narrative students might have already encountered in high school, implicitly or explicitly. For example, I taught Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* to counteract the overwhelmingly male depictions of transcendentalism with Emerson and Thoreau. And when I introduced the concept of, for example, the domestic angel of the hearth, the woman as purely domestic and in the home, I assigned some contextual historical reading that shows that plenty of women in the 19th century worked and that women's employment was usually determined by race and class, much as it is today.

So, those are some of the ways that I've introduced students to the complications of literature and some different ways than they might be familiar with. Usually, when starting a new text is "close read" the first page or the first paragraph together and stop after every sentence and see if anyone has observations about it. That's usually how I introduce the concept of close reading and of thinking deeply with a text for a longer period of time than they might be used to. So, just sitting with it and seeing if anything strikes them as far as associations with other texts that we've read or rhetorical devices, things like that.

SW: You're in your last year as a PhD student at Boston University. How are you feeling? And maybe looking back over your grad school career, has there been a particular class or text that has really shaped your understanding of what it means to teach writing?

KL: Thank you for asking, "How are you feeling," instead of, "How's the writing going?" I think that's really important and helpful and a question you don't often get. Right now, I'm feeling optimistic, possibly because it's so early in my job search. Mostly, I'm feeling ready to move on to something new. I've loved a lot about my grad school years like building lifelong friendships, teaching first-year students, and getting to immerse myself in literature for so many years. Not many people get that opportunity. But in the future, I would really love for teaching to be the bulk of my work. So, I'm hopeful about that possibility. And I would say the last two writing courses I taught, "Queer American Literature and Culture," really transformed how I think about teaching.

Before the pandemic, I was pretty technology averse in the classroom. And then this year, I taught online and relied on technology just to interact with my students. So, that was honestly a humbling and an eye-opening experience. It made me realize that the classroom isn't a place for me to try to assert control over students' attention, but instead, a place where students' needs differ by individual, by ability, by the day. And I developed this class because, as a closeted lesbian in my undergrad years at Fresno State, I took an LGBT literature class with John Beynon, and it was a super crucial window into a queer life for me. Just seeing the course offering in the catalog was a super affirmative experience.

So, I wanted to offer students at Boston University that space to explore their identities and get to know others. Those students were absolutely incredible. I used Slack, which is a communication platform online, for the first time as a replacement for Blackboard. I put all the course readings by week on the Slack page. We also used it for class discussions, not during class but asynchronously. And it was also a place for students to chat informally. So, in a year of political, social, health turmoil, it became a space for memes, for TikToks, and even election night

commiseration for students in the fall of 2020. I plan to continue using Slack in future classes, and as well as continuing the weekly check-ins I talked about earlier.

But overall, I just think of the writing room as a place to make connections both between texts, between people. And those connections are often as surprising to the teacher as to the student. So, it was a little different by semester, but some texts that we looked at were *The Color Purple*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* graphic novel. We also looked at *The L Word*, which is a show that most queer women love to hate, and it's new iteration, *Generation Q*, and compared, how has representation changed over the course of those decades? *Paris Is Burning*, a documentary about ball culture, as well as two episodes of *Pose*, which is an excellent fictional show.

An assignment I really liked was in the first semester, they did their own graphic novel or short comic about their experience. So, they could do that about their experience in the class with texts that they'd read or their experience. Many of them were queer students, so what that experience was like in any iteration. They drew on some of the close reading things that we did with *Fun Home*, looking at graphic novels and looking at images. They drew on some of those tactics of Bechdel to create their own narrative. That was a really fun assignment, both for them at the end of a semester to reflect and for me to see what they've experienced and what they're willing to share.

SW: Kristin, so earlier, you mentioned Fresno State, which is where I got my MA in Composition Theory, and I actually didn't know that we had that connection until you said that and started mentioning some faculty mentors. So, this question is actually about transitioning from being an undergraduate to grad school, and specifically, I'm thinking about transitioning between Fresno State to Boston University. I assume that there would be or was a significant cultural, geographic, and political shift there. What was it like going from the Central Valley to Boston? I'm also thinking about what kind of advice you would give someone who's in a similar position, who's thinking about grad school, maybe someone considering this kind of relocation. What would you say?

KL: You're absolutely right that it was a huge transition in so many different ways. My first year in Boston was super destabilizing and I was very quiet in seminars. One faculty member said they weren't sure if I was just quiet or if I was out of my depths, and it was both. But over the years, I've grown a lot more confident and I credit a lot of that to the experience of teaching. As you said, I went to college in the Central Valley and I grew up in the Central Valley, so Fresno State was really not my first choice to put it mildly. It was only an hour drive from my hometown and I had my sights set on a big name private school. I used to be the type to rant about how boring The Valley is, which you may have experienced some of those rants or given them yourself.

But being a first-generation college graduate at a state school has taught me a lot about how there are incredible professors and students no matter where you go. BU is a great school in a lot of ways, but I've found that people here and perhaps on the East Coast more generally, are bred for higher education and grad school in a way that I extremely wasn't. So, in a lot of ways, I feel more able to pinpoint classist assumptions and practices in academia, and try to challenge them at least in my own classroom and in my own interactions with other academics.

As far as undergrads thinking about grad school, I would encourage them to think carefully about what their goals are for grad school, what they want to get out of it. Recognize that if you're pursuing a PhD in the U.S., it'll probably take longer than you think. And you need to be sure any program you're accepted to will fully fund you for the duration. Something that really helped me was talking to trusted mentors at my undergrad institution, kind of describing my goals to them and seeing if they thought I was a good fit with a grain of salt. Because some people will say, "Don't go no matter what," right? And just see what people think, talk to people about what you want to do and why. You should also know that it takes a lot of time and money to apply to grad school.

And if you're a first-generation college student, you can see if you qualify for the McNair Program, which helps first-generation students apply to PhD programs. I was a McNair scholar and it saved me hundreds, probably thousands of dollars on applications and test fees. It's also super overwhelming, so it's okay to feel like you're swimming in a sea of information and you don't know how to reach the surface. You can always ask for help processing that information from your mentors who you trust or even current graduate students at institutions that you're looking at. Myself, I'm super happy to hear from anyone considering grad school and to talk through it with anyone anytime.

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