Episode 165: Kristine Blair
Pedagogue podcast
Transcript

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

In this episode, Kristine Blair talks about rhetoric and technology, AI and writing, online writing instruction, feminist pedagogies and practices, and leadership and administration.

Kristine L. Blair is Dean of the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts and professor of English at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. Since 2011, she has served as editor of Computer and Composition. Her publications focus on the politics of scholarly publication, techno-feminist methodologies, graduate education, and online pedagogies. Prior to her arrival at Duquesne, she served as dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at Youngstown State University from 2016 to 2019 and chair of the English Department at Bowling Green State University from 2005 to 2014.

Kristine, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your teaching and research interest include digital literacies, multimodality, online pedagogy, feminist theories, and rhetorics and technology, and you've written extensively on all these topics. You were writing about technology and digital spaces and literacies in the early 2000s. Two decades later, here we are. As someone who has been doing this work for a long time in our field, who has contributed in so many ways, what are some current threads of research in rhetoric and technology that you find most pressing for us to address moving forward?

KB: Well, sure. First, let me say thank you so much for your kind words and for the invitation to have this conversation, I've really been looking forward to it. That's a big question and there are multiple ways to address it, but one of the areas that I want to start with that's very obvious is our current, though for maybe our discipline not so current, fascination with AI and ChatGPT and other types of tools. It's very interesting, a few months ago I wrote an essay honoring the 40th anniversary of Computers and Composition, which I've had the honor of editing since 2011, and I didn't really realize in doing that retrospective that one of the first articles published in C&C when it was still more of a newsletter was an article by Hugh Burns on AI. Given his particular research trajectory, that really shouldn't have been a surprise, but we've been talking about the affordances of these tools for a long time.

I think the issue with AI, English departments may not be as progressive with regard to the benefits of AI, but I think writing programs and writing studies see the potential affordances. I think the issue there for us, where we become change agents for students and for colleagues, both in our departments and outside of them, is by foregrounding that role of ethics in our operational definitions of multiliteracies. So we've been relying on that conversation for quite a while, it goes all the way back to say the New London Group and their emphasis on multiliteracies. So other people have talked about that really eloquently, like Stuart Selber and the functional, the critical, and the rhetorical. But I think as we move really full force into this AI universe, the role of

ethical literacies has to be part of that collaboration, part of that conversation so that students understand, just because you have the ability to make these choices, whether it be your paper or some meme you're developing, doesn't mean that you should.

So where does that kind of education occur? It could certainly occur in university level types of courses and courses like Media and Information Literacy or the first year writing course, but I really think it's something that moves beyond even those venues to really be something that, not just writing studies, but the entire academic culture needs to address. How do we deal with the role of ethics? Making that a big part of what we mean by what it means to be literate, what it means to use technology in responsible ways. So that's one area.

SW: Kristine, do you feel like there's going to be a resurgence on certain conversations around ethics and ideologies. Not so much conversations around AI and plagiarism, which are already happening, I'm thinking more specifically about John Duffy's work on virtue ethics and the actual teaching of ethics in writing classrooms by considering what it means to be an ethical speaker and writer. What more nuanced conversations should we be asking around ethics and AI right now?

KB: Well, that's a great question, and I think the answer is it has to, it needs to. It's not that it's entirely not happening, but I think sometimes we get caught up as a discipline, and other people have put this on us, that our focus should be issues of plagiarism, academic integrity. Those of course are very important issues, but it goes far beyond what a student does on their paper, how they research, how they cite, etc, where they look for sources. It's really about how they use technology in the larger culture to represent themselves, to represent information and value systems. So it does get back to some of those things we've seen in political rhetoric with disinformation and so on.

So just a couple days ago, on I think it was Facebook, there were these funny AI images of Trump and Biden as if they were friends, so they were wearing sweaters and drinking cocoa and all that kind of stuff. You can laugh at that utopic imaging, and on one level you could say that's relatively innocuous, but what about things like the robocall that happened in New Hampshire right before the primary last week where President Biden's voice was basically faked and represented as his own discouraging people from turning out at the voting booth last week? So there is that slippery slope of activities, and I think in our multimodal culture that is particularly significant and it gets into other concerns about when we teach rhetorical composing, how do we ensure from a pedagogical and curricular standpoint that those ethical questions move beyond the presumption of purely alphabetic or print text, which tends to be the primary genre of first year composition and English department curricula, not always, but ensuring that we're providing students with that ethical skill set and disposition to address those concerns, both as consumers but especially as producers.

SW: You've written about online writing instruction and multimodality for quite some time. In 2015, you wrote a chapter in Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction titled "Teaching Multimodal Assignments in OWI Contexts." You write that "even online spaces can privilege the alphabetic text" and you encourage the field to think more about how to embrace and assess multimodal assignments in online writing instruction. Online writing instruction has

certainly increased in volume over the last 10 years. How about the integration of multimodal assignments in online writing classes, though? Do you feel like there's still the privileging of the alphabetic text even in our digital environments and classrooms?

KB: That's a great question. First, let me say, I think that there are organizations and specific scholars who are really paving the way to make online learning spaces and online writing instruction as open and as accessible as possible. So the work of the Global Society of Online Learning Educators, GSOLE, the work of Jessie Borgman and Casey McArdle with their PARS approach, which I now think is in its third book length discussion, those are important resources. So I think the theory behind effective online learning and online writing instruction is certainly there in our discipline.

I think the challenges come based on the institutional context in which faculty teach writing online and the level of, dare I say, autonomy and freedom they have to experiment with multi-genre and multimodal artifacts in their classroom. So sometimes that's not even the fault of, say, the writing program. It's literally institutional dynamics about learning outcomes of the first year writing course, for example, and how it connects to general education and how it connects to accreditation and so forth. So there's that element of it.

I also think there are challenges for individual writing instructors who are then really constrained on what they can do to experiment, to innovate, to provide broader points of entry for students. So if we think about making all writing instruction accessible and appealing to diverse learning styles, of course thinking about the materials that we use to teach writing have strong multimodal components, what we look at on the web, what video, what podcasts, what other sorts of materials that are out there that help us contextualize writing among a lot of cultural topics. But when it comes to having students actually produce that similar type of work, I think that's where you can run into challenges, and there's some realistic reasons for that. Sometimes it has to do with the accessibility and the gap in access to multimodal composing tools, so really helping and students understand what's out there that's free.

I think it's also having a continuum of how we define multimodality. So some of us who've been doing this work for a long time might think of multimodality as this fine-tuned podcast or a video essay, when really it might be helping students understand the relationship between image and text in their written documents, it might be understanding the ways to think about how you present information to an audience via something as basic as PowerPoint.

So as long as we look for ways to provide a point of entry for both students and faculty, particularly because of the professional development issues, if the faculty members working in an environment where multimodality, or I should say maybe print is still privileged, and that's a lot of people out there, sometimes the opportunities for professional development, both in terms of designing assignments in diverse ways that allow for different levels of response as well as assessing those different levels of response can be what the real challenge is. That's true whether the course is face-to-face or online, but I think it's particularly compounded in online spaces.

SW: Kristine, has there been a favorite multimodal assignment that you use in your own running classrooms?

KB: Well, one that I've always been a big fan of, but I can take no credit for, is our literacy narrative. I've really deployed those in virtually every class I've taught and have always encouraged students to explore the boundaries of what that might look like. As we've talked about, recently I've often deployed an e-portfolio approach, and what I've done in courses is often made that the first assignment and an assignment that they can go back to over and over and over. So what does their literacy narrative look like at the end of a course from a multimodal standpoint compared to where they started at the beginning? How does it integrate more multimodal artifacts and assets? How does it suddenly go from being purely print to employing video or audio or image, to understand how those skills evolve over time and how literacy and technological literacy in particular is a lifelong process that goes beyond the timeframe of an academic course to something that they have to keep developing and keep working as the tools and the technologies of writing change over years, over generations and so on.

SW: A lot of your work has focused on feminist rhetorics and practices at the intersection of technology. Do you mind talking about what it looks like to take a feminist approach to online writing instruction? What strategies or practices do you feel like complement the values and principles of feminist pedagogies in an online class?

KB: That's a great question, a really difficult one to answer, but I'll start and you can take us in whatever direction that works best. I mean, on some levels, some people might say when you describe feminist pedagogy, "Well, that just sounds like active learning, that decentered curricula and pedagogy," and I think that's right. I think the difference might be, however, really questioning those differential systems of power. I think that, as we were just talking about literacy narratives as a pedagogical strategy, they certainly have the power to do that, to help students see that their access to and comfort with technology has some cultural and intersectional baggage that goes along with it.

At the same time, for me, whether you're in a face-to-face environment, or you're in a hybrid environment or a fully online environment, one thing that I think it's really important to do from a feminist standpoint or a techno-feminist standpoint is really work to demystify the power dynamics of those spaces. That doesn't mean that you erase them, even if you want to and so forth. I remember I had a student once very early in my teaching career tell me, "Just because you put us all in a circle doesn't mean we're collaborating," and I've really taken that to heart. Don't presume because you put these structures in place that they're working, that students are feeling them.

But one of the things I really like to do, especially with the space itself, is ask students what these spaces presume about teaching and learning. What do faculty do in these spaces? What do students do? What are our expected roles and responsibilities and how, in the context of any course, we work to disrupt them? So if I'm standing in a face-to-face course, I'll ask that question while I'm standing at the front. I mean, they get the message pretty quickly.

The same thing is true of online spaces. Why are course management tools, learning management tools, why is it called Blackboard, or why was it called Blackboard? Thinking about what that presumes about the learning environment and the positionality of both the students and

the instructors to really disrupt that and demystify what you're doing. Why am I turning the class over to you to lead a discussion? Why am I not responding to each and every single thing a student says in the course? Because in an online setting, that just re-inscribes that sort of ping pong effect. A student responds to a question, you respond, a student responds to a question, you respond. So that very, dare I say Socratic method, that really maintains the teacher as authority.

So even as I say all that though, Shane, I think the reality is the teacher doesn't lose authority just because you attempt to deconstruct it, and you have to acknowledge that and help students understand your sharing power. You're not necessarily giving away all your power. We still assess, we still have expertise. So really looking at it from that sharing of authority from a feminist perspective, allowing students to come in at different points of entry, I know I've alluded to that before in our conversation, and understanding that they don't have to be experts on the material. They don't have to be expert multimodal composers to experiment and developed leadership skills in the course that makes them co-teachers and make me learning from the possibility and constraints of that process to be a co-learner.

SW: Kristine, some of that previous question is thinking through how you would mentor faculty who are eager to problematize those hierarchical positions of power in teaching specifically through online teaching, which might feel more difficult to deconstruct an asynchronous online course than face-to-face, for example. It might be easy to rely more on traditional norms in an asynchronous environment where there's separation between teacher and student, where the teacher uploads documents and materials and then the student submits or turns things in. Have there been ways that you've encouraged instructors to disrupt these kind of conventional norms in an online teaching environment?

KB: Well, yeah, because the pandemic certainly wasn't our finest moment as online educators, through no real fault of our own. Certainly, the students were so traumatized by COVID that that black screen was a real challenge for so many people. I remember being on an online taskforce at Duquesne where we were talking about these kinds of issues and trying to come up with strategies, not to force students to suddenly be visible online, but to create messaging in syllabi and in the courses themselves that help students understand that they're not just students behind a screen, they are active participants and contributors to a learning community. I really believe in that, though I think community is a buzzword that gets bandied around a lot and sometimes the simulation of community doesn't live up to the authentic artifact. So I concede that, but I do think that that type of messaging about student accountability and responsibility for their own learning, not just for themselves but for other members of the course, is a really important set of messages to get out early and often that might enable them to unmute.

I think the other thing too though, is that if you're able to stay behind a black screen for every single course of the semester, that might signal the need for curricular and pedagogical shifts. I've often seen faculty really take up different types of strategies, and I always go back to one from a colleague of mine when I was at Bowling Green, and he taught a literature course and I loved what he did so, so much. He would have the students do reaction papers just as the same way he did in face-to-face courses for various literary works. Every course, and the students knew it was coming, he would take a couple of students' reaction papers, they were doing them throughout the term, and those few students, three or four of them, would be responsible for

facilitating the class discussion for the day. Their reaction papers would be the ones posted in the discussion board. The students would take on leading the discussion about their ideas and thoughts. I always thought that was a great strategy.

I think the biggest thing about mentoring in this regard is the ability or the willingness to take a risk. We take risks all the time with our pedagogy, and sometimes things go well and you're like, "Yeah, wow, that's great," and sometimes they fail miserably. I always joke, I made a career about writing about all my challenges in the classroom and all my failures, because I had so many of them, but I think that's really true. Take a risk, take a chance. For young instructors, or early career instructors, excuse me, that can be really scary. You want to establish your ethos as an instructor, you want to have credibility, but I think opening your hand to possibilities and presuming that students will rise to the challenge is really the best way to go

SW: Here we could talk about who has that power and who possesses the power, who has the affordances to deconstruct and to negotiate positionality. Because as we both know, we don't have all the same privileges and abilities to do that.

KB: Well, yeah, and I can even give an example where that failed miserably. I was teaching a technical communication course, and what I would do is I would have students work on... We were working on a specific chapter, maybe it was a chapter on usability from the course text, and I would ask students to develop a PowerPoint with the highlights that they would then share with other members of the class, so really helping them grasp the components. They only had to do this once or twice, and some students really enjoyed it, other students hated it.
It goes back to those presumptions. Some of my student evaluation commentary said, "She made us teach the class. I paid for this, she's the teacher. She made us do her work." I'm like, well, maybe I kind of succeeded. But from really getting that point across to the students, I colossally failed with a good number of them, and those were the lowest student ratings I ever received. I'm like, oh my goodness. I thought I was kind of helping everybody grasp the material and not have to listen to me drone on, but it didn't come across that way.

SW: Kristine, you've held several leadership positions, from being a department chair to dean. You're also the editor of Computers and Composition. Was there a specific moment when you set these larger professional goals and decided to work toward these administrative positions? What have you learned about yourself as a teacher from being an editor for one of the major journals in our field?

KB: Sure. I think that that's an equally difficult challenge to address because I always joke that nobody becomes an academic, nobody says, "Oh, I'd like to be a department chair." Who says that? I think, admittedly, sometimes you fall into these roles in sort of necessary and then sometimes challenging ways. I love teaching, I loved research. I feel really fortunate that I was able to do that still as a chair, and much less as a dean, but still some. It's about being open to those possibilities. I knew I was looking for leadership as I was first tenured. Like, well, what happens now? I've enjoyed this, I'd like to get involved.

I really started, I've always joke that I've taken on some really dirty jobs in my career, not necessarily as chair or dean, but one of the things I did really early in my career because I wanted

to get experience was I became chair of the University Grievance Committee, and that was a tough job. I think like anybody, in my career I've really looked for the things that stretch me. What's the next challenge? What can I do to grow as a person and certainly develop as a feminist educator? I've tried to deploy some of those strategies in my role as a chair and a dean, both very authoritarian positions, but it is possible to develop collaborative management styles. I just think you're looking for the open opportunity and I think it's also about figuring out your passion.

I do meet with a lot of people here at Duquesne and elsewhere who are like, "Wow, I'm tenured. What's next for me? I'm really interested in academic administration. What advice could you give me?" I always ask, "Well, what are you passionate about? What leadership can you assume early?" I was really passionate about graduate education, and still am, and so my first real administrative position was being director of graduate studies. Once you have that kind of role in an academic unit, the minute other types of vacancies like chair or associate dean at the graduate school become available, you sort of go into this little queue of folks who might be a viable candidate. That's all the more reason to ensure, especially at the department level as much as possible, those opportunities are transparent, they're open to a range of individuals across the department. Because I know from talking to faculty, it's like, "Well, why did that person get to be the undergraduate director?" or "Why did that person get to be the internship coordinator?" Those are real issues for people because it's tied to individuals' professional advancement.

I just think look for the opportunities, understand your passions, and if they work for you, don't be afraid to take them on, but understand your limits. I don't think anyone should be in these roles forever. I was a chair for nine years. I probably will be a dean, I'm in my eighth year now between Youngstown and Duquesne, I don't see too many more years in that role. It's a lot of work, it's very rewarding, but you have to allow for other voices and other leadership to emerge.

SW: After more than two decades having held leadership and administrative positions, how have those positions helped you better see and understand teaching?

KB: There are a lot of challenges in teaching, and I think that some of them stem to a gap in expectations sometimes between students and faculty. So understanding the need to make expectations clear. So from an administrative perspective, that ties to issues of syllabi effectiveness, assignments, criteria, understanding sometimes why students get confused by certain types of approaches like portfolios, "Where's my grade? How am I doing?" and helping faculty really talk about some of that demystification process of how students understand their progress. So that's one level.

On a more humanistic level, I think that after all these years of being in an administrative role, when faculty truly are having problems, it's often tied to something very deeply personal going on in their lives, a family crisis, as I get older and deal with elder care, for example. So it can be challenges in parenting, in elder care, in wellness and health, all the things that ideally are in place or can be managed and still have you focused on being the best that you can be for your students. When that doesn't happen, rather than to take punitive approaches, to really understand how we can help people get through this moment. It's not like this lifelong branding moment, but yet I think sometimes there's a lot of people who might feel that they haven't lived up to their potential as an educator because of these things, and we really need to be supportive and instill

that ethic of care. So that's kind of the feminist in me wanting to support faculty as much as possible when these things happen, because they do every single day, especially during the pandemic.

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