Episode 5: Kyle Larson and Dana Comi
Pedagogue podcast
Transcript

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

The purpose of Pedagogue is promote diverse voices at various institutions and help foster community and collaboration among teachers of writing. Pedagogue is committed to facilitating conversations that move across institutions and positions and is designed to help celebrate the labor teachers do inside and outside the classroom.

I love having conversations with teachers who have taught for decades, who are well-established in the field, who have made great contributions to teaching writing, but I also love talking to teachers who are new to teaching, who are in the middle of creating and innovating and establishing their own voice, their own pedagogies and practices. I find these conversations dynamic and energetic. One of my hopes for creating this podcast was to use it as a platform for graduate students and emerging teacher scholars. The first bonus episode is dedicated to re-imagining English graduate education. If you haven't listened to it, go to pedagoguepodcast.com and check it out. I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Early on, I imagined this podcast as a real opportunity to move across institutions and positions, to celebrate graduate students and their work and their labor, to bring attention to that work and labor to bring more attention to that work in labor because really, I want to support others. I genuinely want to see teachers and students succeed and I want to use this platform to help them succeed. I want to see them in positions that provide opportunities for them to succeed, structures and systems that work for them, not against them. I think back over the past 10 years, and all I see is how much I've been supported, how much others have helped me learn and grow as a teacher and writer. I can name a lot of people. I'm sure we all can. And you know, I believe that's what makes this community incredibly special. We are committed to helping each other.

In this episode, I had the opportunity to speak to two graduate students and emerging teacher scholars. Kyle Larson is a PhD candidate in composition and rhetoric at Miami University and a cofounder and moderator of nextGEN. He researches counter public and social movement rhetorics.

And please welcome Dana Comi, a PhD student at the University of Kansas. Her research interests include rhetorical genre studies, digital rhetoric and technical communication with a particular focus on community-centered design and social advocacy.

Thank you, Kyle and Dana, for joining us.

SW: I want to start by giving you both space to talk about what you're doing, what you're discovering, researching, writing and teaching, anything that excites you about the labor you're producing.

KL: Yeah, so there are three projects right now I'm really, really excited about. So for the last two years, I've been surveilling these white nationalists online. They have rhetorical style guides, databases of copy and paste responses. They swarm online platforms with copy and paste rhetoric. So one of my things that I research is counterpublics and counter public rhetoric, activism and social movements, and I brought on Dr. Guy McHendry from communication studies to help me with this article, too. But one of the frustrations I get with counter public scholarship is how sometimes they'll apply to black feminist counterpublics and then people then say neo-Nazi counterpublics. And to me, if power is embedded in your framework at all, there's no way you can talk about that. So this article is about what we're calling parasitic publics, to intervene in that.

The second thing that have gone on right now is I work with the black student movements on my campus to revive a program from 1981. A colleague of mine did archival research at the composition office and found that in 1981, the Black Student Action Association at Miami University embedded anti-racist panels in the first year writing classes to disrupt anti-black myths.

So I was working with the black student movements on campus and I handed one of the organizers the archival documents. She read through them. She was like, "Let's revive these." We revived them for last fall as racial consciousness 101, and we had embedded them into 85 courses, had eight panelists doing really awesome and radical stuff. The university tried to shut it down. They were unsuccessful in their arguments. And so we're redoing those right now and I'm really excited about that.

And the third thing that the NextGen code of conduct, although we hate that terminology and we're going to replace it, we've been slowly building our cultural community and people have commented pretty regularly on the atmosphere and the rhetoric and the uplift that happens on NextGen, and so how do we embed that into the structure of NextGen so that we become a model for the field.

SW: Dana, what about you? What excites you about the work that you're doing right now? I know you're in a little bit different stage. You just finished coursework. So I'm curious as to what you're investigating and discovering and potentially even how that is impacting your teaching.

DC: I am reading for my doctoral exams right now, and my key areas of focus are rhetorical genre studies and then tech comm with a particular interest in community-centered design, design as advocacy. So those are the areas that I'm reading in right now. I sort of decided that that's what I was doing based off where I went basically in the projects in coursework. So I definitely came into graduate school with a plan of what I was going to do, scrapped that and then found out during coursework what I gravitated towards and what really interested me and so yeah, I really love some of the intersections between RGS and tech comm. They're broad connections right now, I think.

I'm excited to have my dissertation proposal good to go because I'll have much more of a succinct way of talking about this, but some of the connections I see that interest me are with some of the public genres and community work, thinking about so much of RGS is

understanding how writing's happening in real communities in particular spaces and understanding issues of power and privilege and access through a critical genre approach.

One of the things that I like about tech comm is that especially through the user-centered design, human-centered design and usability, feels like it pairs really well with that to be able to talk about, "Oh, well, here's how you can design and redesign things in order to promote access." Right now we're in unit two for my tech comm class and they are working on an instruction set of some kind. We're moving through a design thinking process throughout the entire project, which means that at the very beginning of the project, they have to figure out some sort of community partner, whether that be an individual or a group of people that they want to talk to try to actually identify a project through conversation with people from the beginning, not just choosing a group and saying, "Okay. Well, I think that they would want an instruction set for this," right? So that sort of empathizing stage, and then moving through the design process.

And there's lots of ways that they can do this, and then there's lots of ways that they can't within the space of the class and especially that eight week semester, but trying to collaborate and work with a community partner rather than assume needs and assume a solution before they really understand the problems. That's one way that we sort of do that in the tech com class and a lot of that then involves talk about genre and medium, right? The sort of, "Well, what are you hoping to help them accomplish or do or understand or gain access to? Okay, so what kind of texts responds to those needs?"

SW: I mean, the work you both just shared is exciting, energizing, fresh, new, and I love it. Graduate school is such a good place for discovery and innovation and it has a great exploratory value. I'm thinking about how coursework and reading for exams, while exhausting and laborious helps for creativity. But you aren't just students and researchers who are writers. You're also teachers. And when I say grad school is exhausting and laborious, it's really because you're being asked to do and be so many things at once. Teaching, coursework, thesis, dissertation, writing, campus involvement, national organizations, professional service, workshops, extracurricular activities and events and more.

I want to recognize that labor and really bring light to those conditions. Even though you are a part of a community and cohort, I still feel like it's easy to feel this sense of isolation or this sense of being alone and the midst of that graduate school community. I guess I want to frame this next question with first, an understanding that your grad school experience and labor is unique, and we can't oversimplify that labor, and we can't just say what works for you will work for someone else. So with that being said, I'm really curious as to what has surprised you the most about grad school labor?

DC: I would say that when I was in undergrad, and I think that this is a pretty common experience of a lot of them people in my program who are now in graduate school, I was involved in everything. I felt like I sort of got into the English department, discovered that that was my place, and was involved in the lit magazine, was involved in the medieval studies club. I felt like I was involved in everything. And that was great and really all of those involvements helped prepare me for graduate school. But you can't do that in graduate school.

I think that that was one of the things that I realized my first year. I got involved in a bunch of different things and by my second year, I really had to think about what was sustainable to participate in, what actually energized me and what allowed me to be a good teacher and be a good researcher and be involved in meaningful service. And so I think one thing that surprised me was that I ended up needing to sort of draw back or say no to things so that I could invest in a smaller number of things, which again, to me coming from undergraduate was very counterintuitive.

I felt like going into graduate school sort of was sort of like, "Oh yeah, I'm going to do rhet comp and here's kind of what I think that is," and then actually taking courses and like, "Oh, okay. There's actually a lot of routes," and now even being sort of in that space between rhet comp and tech comm, right? Sort of negotiating that is a similar kind of feeling, like, "Yeah, where's my home base, but where am I also going to pursue projects that are really genuinely interesting to me and that might lead me in directions that I didn't expect?"

SW: You know, Kyle, I'm wondering if we can continue on this conversation of labor conditions, but turn it just a little bit. As you're reflecting on your own labor conditions and your own graduate school experience, I'm wondering if you could share what piece of advice has been most helpful to you in the midst of the different roles and different activities that you're a part of. And this advice could be from a mentor. It could be something that you discovered in graduate school.

KL: One of the best advice I got was from Jason Palmeri during the graduate training practicum when I first entered my masters at Miami, and it was to forgive yourself, because as a graduate student, I've experienced times when I could have addressed something better or I failed to address something or I wasn't able to do that reading because of my schedule, and so just to forgive yourself and not beat yourself up over it.

But also, I think it's important to be self-critical in that process. Just don't forgive yourself and move on, but really, for instance, if you miss a certain reading, ask yourself, "What is that reading? And what is my relation to that discourse?" If you're studying transfer and you're missing Neisha-Anne Green's readings on being an anti-racist accomplice, then that's a problem. That is, if you do not allocate time in your schedule to learn from communities that are not a part of your own and to what is directly related to your research. I think that that is an issue that you need to actively address and learn from. I think there are a lot of times where graduate students feel guilty, especially first gen graduate students, about not being able to do all the readings but it still makes us feel bad. So I think just forgiving yourself and learning from the process and growing from that.

SW: Dana, what about you? What advice has been most helpful through your graduate school experience?

DC: Yeah. I think as a graduate student, so I had my undergraduate mentor at Whitworth, which is my previous institution. My mentor John Pell said this. So basically, my first time at Cs, I went as an undergrad for the undergrad poster presentation with my best friend, Audrey. And we were so nervous and so freaked out and John, our mentor, said, "The stakes have never been so low.

You'll be fine." And I don't think I listened at that moment, but that phrase, "The stakes have never been so low," has actually been really helpful to me as a graduate student. Not to sort of dismiss the real stress and anxiety and fear that comes with graduate school, but to reframe some of that within a wider ... I came into graduate school and I wasn't sure if I wanted to be a professor, but after the first year, I knew that that's what I wanted to do and that's what I'm working towards.

And so with all of those really scary sort of milestones where you can learn much from grad students who have done it before or you can read books, you can get advice from your advisor, but at a certain point, you just have to experience it. I always sort of say that to myself to reframe it as in like, "Yeah, taking my doctoral exams will be stressful and I might feel really nervous and anxious leading up to it, but doing that is going to help me then be eligible to be able to work on my dissertation proposal, which will also be stressful." And so sort of reframing it in that this is a much wider lifetime of milestones. So I think as a graduate student, that's been helpful because it sort of helps avoid the, "This is the end of the world," crisis feeling.

SW: You know, one thing I've been thinking about here recently a lot is re-imagining English graduate education and what gets done in graduate courses and whether or not that work that some faculty are asking students to do is setting them up for both academic and nonacademic success. So I've really been contemplating what graduate programs should be doing in graduate courses and whether or not potentially the traditional, "Here's a graduate course on blank topic. Here are readings. Write a seminar paper," is the best fit for maybe our own values in composition studies and writing studies and whether or not those values help out graduate students. So I'm curious as to whether either of you have any ideas of how to potentially re-imagine the graduate classroom and the potential directions I guess a graduate classroom could take.

KL: That's a great question. I think a few different ways. There could be different ways to structure a class. If you're doing a writing program ministration class, is it really helpful to do a seminar paper on something you may not have experience with, especially something that's so context specific? So what different ways can we structure the genre of the graduate seminar to better fit the kind of material that we're engaging with?

If we're doing a public rhetoric seminar, does it really make sense to do a seminar paper? It may, maybe as a midterm, but in what ways are we engaging and learning from the public too? Where are those knowledge practices coming into our graduate seminar? In what ways can we challenge the dominant genre of the graduate seminar to better account for the material we're engaging with or what is pedagogically most conducive?

At the end of the day, I think innovative structure would challenge us in interesting in new ways and help us explore ourselves and our material in different ways, and so what ways can we play with that structure? Treating students as thinking partners is a very important practice and an uplifting one for us because we all come with knowledges that the institution may not value, and so how can we bring those knowledges to bear upon how we're learning and what we're learning?

SW: I think one thing to be mindful of is that all of us, teachers and graduate students, researchers and writers, are a part of our local communities, that we are community members and that innovation happens outside of academia and the classroom. Both of you are deeply invested in your local communities and I've seen graduate students lead some incredible initiatives and bring energy and a sense of commitment to partnering communities with the university. And this work isn't for academic purposes. It isn't for research or writing. It's for helping create sustainable relationships and really, better communities. It's about caring about where we are in the spaces we inhabit. I was hoping we can end with this. Dana, I know you are doing this type of work in Lawrence, Kansas. Do you mind sharing more about that work and its purposes?

DC: It's basically through the ramen restaurant in town, Ramen Bowls. Ramen Bowls donates noodles and ingredients. And so we just have to go out and do a quick grocery trip to supplement all that and then make sure that everything's set up. A collaboration with an organization outside of the university that's basically really interested in promoting food security and addressing food insecurity, students both at Haskell Indian Nations University and University of Kansas, there was a small scale study but one that came out a few years ago that found that, I think it was like 40% of students at KU experience food insecurity at some level. And so it's just a once a week ramen dinner, like a ramen buffet that students can just show up, they can pay $2 if they want to, but there's literally no pressure to do so, and just basically go through do it yourself ramen buffet and there's cupcakes and it's just a totally fun event just like you would have on campus. And we have usually about 60 to 75 students that come each week consistently, both undergrad and grad.

And so what I do, I'm the volunteer coordinator, so I basically make sure that undergrads who need to get service hours or just want to volunteer, that is kind of all organized because we normally need three-ish people in addition to myself to make it run smoothly. And then I basically just make sure that the ramen bar is set up, because they cook their own noodles, make sure the noodle station doesn't overflow or something terrible happens during the night, and then basically make sure, a big part of the job is sort of scanning the room, making sure people are comfortable. And so that kind of work, again, super separate from working on a committee but still involved with campus. You get to meet other grad students from other departments, which has been really, really fun.

Gotten to meet a lot of students from Haskell. It's one of the few spaces I've seen in Lawrence actually where there's KU students and Haskell students consistently hanging out in one space. And so it's a once a week, basically six hour commitment that's really, really energizing. And it's great because it reminds me basically that I'm a community member in addition to, regardless of sort of my academic role, which I think is really important to have that perspective as a graduate student because it's such a precarious, stressful situation, and your identity is sort of in flux always. So yeah, that's basically what ... and it's called ikigai. So that's what ikigai noodles basically is.