Episode 21: Laura Gonzales
Transcript

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

In this episode I talk with Laura Gonzales. We talk about digital rhetorics, technical communication, language diversity and accessibility, and community literacies. I want to start with a fantastic quote from Laura's book *Sites of Translation*. I think this quote in this passage really guides our conversation and the questions I ask Laura about language diversity and digital rhetorics. So here we go.

> "Having witnessed acts of translation at various stages of my life and having negotiated my own linguistic transitions as an immigrant in the United States, I know that multilingual communicators have developed cultural rhetorical and technical skills through their lived experiences and practice these skills as they transform information across languages. When multilinguals cannot immediately decide on an adequate word in a specific language, we make do with whatever resources are more appropriate and available."

That's from our guest, Laura Gonzales' book *Sites of Translation*. Laura Gonzales is an Assistant Professor of Digital Writing and Cultural Rhetorics in the English department at the University of Florida. Her research intersects language diversity, technical communication and community engagement. She is the author of *Sites of Translation* which was awarded the 2016 Digital Rhetoric Collaborative Book Prize and the 2020 CCCC Advancement of Knowledge Award.

Laura, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: So I'm going to start with a pretty large question about digital rhetorics and technical communication, which are two classes you teach. There's a large body of research in both fields, but I think they aren't mutually exclusive. I think they inform how we see and teach writing, and I think there's a lot of crossover between the two. I'd like to hear your orientation of digital rhetorics and your orientation of technical communication and how you conceive of these two areas of research, and maybe what you do in these classrooms, how quite possibly they intersect and inform the work that you do as a writing teacher?

LG: I think that's a great question. I think a lot of people have different opinions about these two things because many people have different definitions of digital rhetoric and technical communication. A lot of people consider digital rhetorics related specifically to digital technologies and multimedia and making meaning or making arguments through different media. But I like to embrace a more expansive definition of digital rhetoric. Drawing on Angela Haas' work and her idea that digital rhetoric starts with our digits, our fingers, the way that we see the world in addition through our eyes and our bodies. And so taking that approach has also helped me make connections I think between digital rhetoric and technical communication. Obviously technical communication also has many different perspectives and definitions, but my orientation to technical communication is helping students understand how complex information can be

adapted, repurposed, remixed, and shared with a wide range of audiences both professionally and in the community, as well as academic audiences.

So I think at the core of this is the idea that all tools and technologies, whether they're behind a screen or not, are always infused with cultural values. A lot of times we don't see these values because we assume they are just neutral in a sense. But as a lot of technical communication and digital rhetoric scholars have taught us, tools and technologies are not neutral. Things are designed for some people and inherently exclude some people. And so I use digital rhetoric as a way to teach my technical communication students that anything that they design is excluding and including certain people. And that's okay because you can't design something for everybody, right? There's no general audience. But I try to help my students be more honest and I think aware of who they're excluding in their designs and who they're purposely including and what the implications of that are.

And I think digital rhetoric is a way for me to help my technical communication students understand that as it applies to the design of technical documentation, any kind of technical communication for a wide range of audiences. So that all sounds very broad, but I think specifically we look at how different tools and technologies that have been designed. So it can be anything from like a form to sign up for a lease or a patient medical history form to a social media campaign or an ad and using digital rhetoric to understand what are the implications of that design and then applying that to our work as technical communicators. So one of the things that I really like about teaching technical communication is that I get to tell my students we don't just analyze things and look at them and critique them. We do that, but then we're also builders of things.

We're also designers ourselves and so technical communication lets me, and this is just how I perceive it, but lets me take digital rhetoric to the next level because it's not just analyzing different tools and technologies, but also building different tools and technologies. And that's what I try to help my technical communication students see is that they have the power to make design decisions, make recommendations for designs based on their own experiences. And that digital rhetoric is a way to do that ethically and responsibly.

SW: How do you frame ethics in your technical communication class?

LG: For the discussion on ethics and technical communication, I look at a lot of the work that people like Natasha Jones do in technical communication, moving beyond the idea of what's right and what's not right, but moving toward undoing oppression in whatever small way we can and for students, a lot of times that seems really big. I have students ask a lot of times, doesn't this mean that anything I make has to have a social agenda? And I'm like, "Well, anything you make will have a social agenda." Does it have to change the world? No, but you can change a small piece of the world. You can do good in a very small capacity just by being aware of the implications of the things that you're making. You are making a positive change in the world.

I guess that's at the core of my technical communication classes is thinking about when you're making something, who are you including and who are you excluding? And the next follow-up question to that is, could you be more inclusive in this design? And how? So things like how do

we consider people with multiple abilities, people who speak multiple languages, people from different backgrounds, people with different cultural backgrounds? How do we incorporate this into our design from the beginning of the design and not later on, right? So not sort of retrofitting something you've already made to think about inclusivity at the end, but thinking about that at the beginning, that has been helpful to me and I think helpful to my students in designing things that are more inclusive with the understanding that nothing is inclusive to everybody.

SW: I read a passage from Chapter 1 of Sites of Translation earlier at the beginning of this episode. Sites of Translation is rich in methodologies and data that provide a nuanced understanding of language diversity and technology. You emphasize language accessibility and community sustainability among other things. What continues to stand out to you through this research and how does that influence the way you think about teaching writing?

LG: So what stands out to me still, and I struggled with this in the book. I mean also this was my dissertation so we learn a lot through writing a dissertation and then I think you also learn a lot by writing your first book. It's transformative in a lot of ways and it definitely continues to be for me. For me, what stands out is – I would say two things.

One is the focus on community. That is something that continually used to stick out to me anytime I have a question about how something works. So like how does language diversity play a role in writing with technologies? For example, I look at the way that's already happening in community context and I tend to find the answers there and the expertise that people already are sharing every day just to do their job. So to me, that is a huge lesson from writing this book that I continue to come back to.

And anytime I have a question, a disciplinary question, I just remind myself like, well go see where this is already happening. See how you can contribute to those efforts and then you're going to learn. So that's a big thing for me. And that's something I share with my students. I don't necessarily make my students read my book in every class. But I did talk about the process of working with the communities that I work with in the book. Going through that process of writing a book and the types of things that you learn and what the relationships look like as I was making that book and what I learned through those relationships. The community element is, I think, the biggest thing that I continue to come back to in the book as I go to work with other organizations.

In the first book, one of the community organizations I worked with was the Hispanic center of Western Michigan. And the people I work with their just changed my life. And one of the biggest lessons I learned there was, you're not going to learn how language diversity and technology are threaded together until you're doing it. And it was only by working with that organization that I learned those connections. And so, I try to orient to new projects that way, too. So working with new communities, coming into it, thinking how can I contribute? What can I learn from the stuff you're already doing without trying to necessarily intervene at the beginning?

The other thing in relation to methods is the value of interdisciplinarity and looking at issues through different angles. Something like language is so broad, language diversity is something so

many fields and disciplines look at. And by just looking at language diversity or technology through one discipline or one academic conversation, I would miss so much and I realized that and as a grad student that was so overwhelming to me because I'm like, "Oh my God, I thought I was in *this field*, but maybe I'm in *this field*, am I in *any field*? I don't know." And I still feel like that sometimes, but I give myself space to read stuff in fields that are adjacent to what I feel I'm in, if that makes sense. So thinking about like language diversity, I started in rhetoric and composition then did work in technical communication. But a lot of the conversations on language diversity that were, I think the most groundbreaking in my perspective were happening in English education. I started to read that work because educators have been working with linguistically diverse communicators for a long time and writing about it, right?

And so they have theories and methodologies that can be really beneficial to us. So to me, that notion of interdisciplinarity and thinking really carefully about like how I'm going to draw boundaries around my reading and the work that I'm engaging with and how I'm going to expand those boundaries based on what I'm doing is something I continue to carry with me. I think that's something I learned through that book because when I got reviewer feedback from different fields, they would say, "Well, have you read *this* and have you read *that*?" And I would say, "No, I haven't." None of us can read everything. But there were times that I started to listen to conversations that kept drawing me in, especially in English education and I was like, "Oh, this really makes a lot of sense." Does that mean that I need to cite everything in the book and change the book and change my dissertation? No. So I'm not recommending that. But I think being open to listening to other conversations and how different fields and disciplines are having different conversations can be really valuable to researchers. And that's been a big takeaway for me.

SW: So we've been talking about digital rhetoric and what it means to think through technology in the writing classroom. And your work focuses on language diversity and language accessibility. Let's focus now on translingual approaches to teaching. You co-write an article in Computers and Composition about digital composing and translingual approaches. What does it mean to teach digital composition through a translingual framework?

LG: Yeah, so what I think is really useful about the translingual framework is that it moves us away from this idea of languages as static things that can just be transported wholesale from, one expression to another. So in our brains, we don't have containers labeled English and Spanish, for example, in my brain, or English and French and whatever else, somebody might speak, like that doesn't exist, right? All of our linguistic practices are always in our brain all the time. They're always interacting, they're always making connections to these things that we see and hear. And so the way that we speak is not based on one single container of a language that we just decided to go into that day or for that expression and transport out. But what we say out loud is based on all of our language practices interacting all the time and interacting with other people as well.

So that's the thing that I find really valuable in a translingual approach is this move away from understanding that there's one standard English, one standard Spanish, one standard some other language, but that languages are always changing. Languages are always in motion. Dictionaries are always growing, right? So language is always changing and being adopted by people because language is a tool that people use to communicate. And so I would say the same with technology.

And I try to have these conversations with my students. Technology's always changing. There's not one right way to make a visual design or one right way to make a video that's always changing. And so how can we take this translingual approach, understanding communicative practices as fluid and always changing and apply it to all the different options that we have when we compose in digital environments. And so what that does, I think is expand students' approaches or what they see as viable options for making an argument or saying something in their writing.

It doesn't have to be standardized. It doesn't have to look like a five-paragraph essay. It can be drawing on multiple language practices and multiple technologies at once. It doesn't have to be a formal film. It can include some video and also some visual texts and also sounds, it doesn't have to be a polished podcast necessarily, but it can be some podcast elements that also have a script, I don't know. Whatever students find to be most appropriate in a specific context. So I think the translingual approach is a nice way because I can ground it in language. I can say, how has language changed just in your lifetime to students or just in one context, or how do you change the way you speak based on who you're talking to? Like if you're talking to your parents or talking to someone at school, how do you change your language?

Okay, well then how do you change the way that you communicate through technology? And they'll tell me about different platforms that they use to talk to different people. They'll say, I use WhatsApp to talk to my family internationally because you can make groups easier and a lot more people are on that. And then I use Twitch, is that right? Something else. I use something else to talk to other people because that's what's understood to us. And so I open up that conversation for students so that we can say, "Okay, well what about us? Like we're talking to each other. How are we going to talk to each other in this class? How are you going to talk to me when you do your assignments? How are you going to talk to your peers? How are we going to talk to your community partners? If we're doing like a sort of service-learning project." There's a lot of options available to make those conversations be as dynamic as possible. So, what are we going to select and why? And I think the translingual approach lets me do that in a really efficient way.

SW: Your work extends well-beyond the classroom. You just mentioned community partnerships and relationships and literacies. How do you use digital technologies – and the power of technology – within community work?

LG: Yeah, so this has been awesome actually because I have learned so much about how different community organizations and community groups use technology to support their work. For example, I am working on a project with a group from Oaxaca, Mexico, a group that supports indigenous language translators and interpreters and we hosted a conference where we brought together different indigenous language interpreters and translators to develop kind of a set of best practices. Like what does indigenous language translation interpretation look like? At the end of that conference we had a session where we were just discussing like what are the takeaways from our conversations. And everybody in that group, there were about 300 attendees we had like grouped into tables, round tables, and then everybody shared takeaways. They all pointed to digital technologies and the power of digital technologies in supporting indigenous language revitalization, indigenous language preservation and so on.

And they told me so many ways that they're making this happen. So they wanted to develop a kind of online network of indigenous language translators and interpreters. And one of the projects that stemmed from that is that we co-wrote a kind of collection from the conference itself that was in five languages. So it was in English, Spanish, Mixe, Mazateco, and Zapotec. So five languages and just kind of negotiating how to structure that book taught me a lot about the connections between technology and language. A lot of times if we read a book in the U.S. the English will come first and then there might be a translation footnoted or something like that. Or if there's something in a foreign language it will be italicized. But in my conversations with this group, we decided to put the English last.

The indigenous languages would come first and thinking about a technology, like the book as a technology, and it'll be in a digital form as well – how we order things, how we represent things, can make rhetorical arguments about which languages we value and why. And it was through my conversations with this group of people that I learned about how to use technology to make rhetorical arguments even if you're not making them directly, right? So if I put the indigenous language first, I'm saying that's most important, especially if it's being published in through like an English dominant press or a press in the U.S. so that's just one example. But I noticed the more community work that I do, the more I notice the different ways in which organizations are leveraging technology to support language diversity.

SW: Do you do this work in your technical communication class?

In my technical communication class, I ask my students to work on a project with a client toward the middle of a semester. So we've done some reading about technical communication and social justice, technical communication and community work. And then I asked them to apply what they've learned into their work with a community of their choice. So a pretty typical service learning model but a lot of my students, these are undergrads and a lot of them don't have community connections yet, and in their college town. I always tell them about the projects that I'm doing with community members and say, "You're welcome to work with any community that you want. Here is some options." I tell them about the projects I'm working on and things I could do. And in my class last semester I actually had some video footage from interviews that I did at this conference with the indigenous language interpreters.

One of my students was like, "I would love to edit those videos into a short montage of interview clips that can be used in your digital book." I was like, "Oh, that's awesome. Well they're in Spanish, is that okay?" And he was like, "Oh, I understand Spanish. No problem." I would have never known this about my student. It wasn't something he advertised. It wasn't something that came up in our class conversations. But he volunteered himself. He saw that opportunity, volunteered to do it and then brought his linguistic assets to that project. On top of that, he had video editing skills that were way above mine. So we totally lucked out, right? But it was just, I find more and more benefits in opening up those avenues for my students, telling them what I'm working on, they are like interested in what we're doing.

They're like, "You wrote a book that's so cool." I'm like, "Most people don't think that's cool because that's just my job." You know? But when they see language and technology come together in different communities, students respond really well typically. And then they bring

their own orientations and their own assets to the table when it comes to that work. I've seen that with this project that I just mentioned, but I've also seen it with students in their own communities that they're working with. Even if it's like a student organization, a sorority or fraternity that they're working in, they understand the language and technology and their connections through the conversations, and then they apply it to things that they see matter in the world. I think that's a huge benefit of getting the chance to teach these students.

SW: Thank you, Laura, and thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.