

Episode 132: Laura Hartmann-Villalta

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Laura Hartmann-Villalta talks about transitioning from part-time to full-time faculty, contingent labor, Spanish literature, continuative pedagogy and mindfulness, and first year writing.

Laura Hartmann-Villalta is a feminist Latina scholar who has been teaching first-year writing courses since 2006. The themes of her composition classes range from "security, gender, texts" to ethnographic explorations of discourse communities. Hartmann-Villalta enjoys incorporating archival explorations, mindfulness, and visual rhetoric into her writing classroom. Her scholarship focuses on foreign women's involvement in the Spanish Civil War, and she frequently writes about the intersection between women's lives, visual culture, human rights, and war. Her publications include the recently published engaged humanities short piece, "How I Talk about Activism without Talking about Activism." Hartmann-Villalta earned her PhD in English literature from Northeastern University. Currently, she is a lecturer in the University Writing Program at Johns Hopkins University.

Laura, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You're transitioning this semester between institutions from Georgetown to Johns Hopkins and from a part-time role to full-time faculty position. What do you think this transition will allow you to do as an instructor and scholar?

LHV: Yeah, the transition from Georgetown to Johns Hopkins has really fulfilled a dream of mine. I loved being at Georgetown and I've had a very positive experience as part-time faculty. I can talk more about that but there have just not been opportunities to get a full-time job at Georgetown. When this opportunity at Hopkins came up, I jumped at it because that has always been my long-term goal and a pretty broadly constructed long-term goal of being full-time in the academy. Hopkins is in this quite incredible, once in a lifetime place where it is revitalizing its undergraduate curriculum and as part of that revitalization it is putting writing at the center. Undergraduates are going to be taking something like five writing classes, some of them in the writing program, some of them being writing intensive within their major. Hopkins is putting in a bunch of resources to expand its writing program to meet the necessary demand that it's about to create. It's making first year writing required no matter what for its incoming class. And that is a change too. So they just hired a bunch of people and I was one of them. One of the incredible things is the Hopkins position is a two-load, which is the same as my part-time position at Georgetown. There's a lot of shadow contingency factors that we can read into that at one university, it's a full-time position; at another, it's a part-time position.

One thing that I'm really excited about at Hopkins is the ability to collaborate across different units with the sense that I'm going to be there for multiple years. Because as a part-time contingent faculty member, even though I was 95% certain that I would be rehired every

semester, that was always a question is whether one would be rehired every semester because it was a semester-by-semester contract. Being full-time really allows me to spread my wings and invest and be able to talk about growing something in multiple semester terms rather than trying to conduct an experiment in one 15 week term and saying, “Will I have the chance to repeat this will? Or did I get it so wrong that I’m not ever going to try it again?” It really brings in a safety net for experimentation and for my scholarship. I mean, it’s incredible because I’ll be able to not engage in side hustles that have been expanding my resume and use that time for scholarship and research.

SW: Do you mind talking about the challenges of being contingent faculty and the precarious labor conditions associated with such a position? I’m also really interested in hearing what kinds of work you’re doing with the MLA committee on contingent labor in the profession.

LHV: As one of the slogans goes, like my teaching conditions are your learning conditions. The fact of the matter is contingent faculty, whether they’re part-time or full-time renewable, they’re the majority of faculty in the United States nowadays. Georgetown was no exception to that. The majority of teaching faculty are part-time hired semester by semester or they’re full time with one year appointments or three year appointments. I was fortunate at Georgetown to do that. There’s also a union representing the part-time adjunct faculty, and that had just finished its first collective bargaining agreement when I was hired. They had just gone through their first negotiations and I got involved in the union, mostly because I was excited to learn what it meant to have a union and what the union could do for me individually and what I could do for our collective. That was an enlightening experience.

I had left my PhD program once I graduated. There were the beginnings of a union happening there, and so I hadn’t had much experience with that but being precarious is really stressful and that takes up a lot of mental time. The writing program director when I was at Georgetown had just stepped down. Her name is Sherry Lincoln, and she’s a giant in working class studies. She has a history of labor organizing. She really ran the program with collaboration and a lot of dignity though the majority of her teaching faculty are part-timers making up the writing program. That was a super positive experience. The stress comes from even though one is sure you feel it, I know I’m going to get a contract one also knows that one is the most expendable piece in the institutional budget. Any kind of nervousness, any kind of bumps in the road, like a pandemic make one concerned. Then there is that stuck in placeness of being precarious that it feels like you’re in a well and there’s just no way out. There’s no avenue to full-time work within the institution, or at least that’s how I felt applying for positions and saying that you’re terrific, but you don’t have the experience that we’re looking for.

As a result, part of precarity was always doing other work, always. I wrote research reports for MIT on a one-off basis. I substituted at an elite high school teaching writing and history. I think a lot of contingent faculty members can identify with that. Yes, they’re teaching a lot and they’re economizing and maximizing in all kinds of other ways too to try to make ends meet in a very practical way. Thankfully, I didn’t have those financial pressures as much as other people do because my husband is tenure track and tenured now. But there’s also that sense of, “I have to find a way to get this experience that is holding me back.” And the trap of precarity, you’re always looking for a way for things to improve and almost all the time they will not, regardless

of what effort one puts into it. That is so counter to a lot of the stories that we tell ourselves about success and about the meritocracy. It's really hard to wrap one's mind around. I'm both existing in this space and I'm choosing to exist in it and I'm somewhat unhappy with it and there's nothing I can really do to improve it.

One book that I really recommend everyone in the academy to be reading is *The Adjunct Underclass* by Herb Childress and it's got a very provocative subtitle, something like "How American Colleges Betrayed their Students and Faculty." The subtitle's polemical; the book is not as polemical. When I read that text, it really clarified that sense of like, "Oh, it's not me." Part of my journey as a contingent faculty member was looking for avenues of leadership where I could exert some kind of force and take some kind of control over my destiny. That was part of my union work at Georgetown. Then later volunteering to be on the Committee on Contingent Labor in the Profession, which is CLIP. The first of CLIP's major responsibilities is organizing. We have two standing panels at MLA, and we want those panels to represent contingent labor's interests to have contingent faculty on it and they're guaranteed. Part of our work is what are we going to present on? What are we proposing? How can we collect people to be on these panels?

If you are interested in participating, reach out to me because we are always looking for participants. It looks a lot like others putting together panels looks like, right? People reach out to their friends, and I'm always looking to widen my circle of friends in that sense. The second responsibility is getting together to represent contingent labor's interests to the MLA executive board. This past year that looked like us as a committee writing a letter to MLA back in the spring, saying that for MLA 2023, we want our panels to be on Zoom. We want them to be virtual, and we are advocating for pedagogical based panels to have either a hybrid or a virtual option or to be all virtual. The reason being is that there's a genuine concern among the committee, but also a little bit among MLA about the relevance of the Modern Language Association to contingent faculty who are teaching five, five or six loads who are teaching all writing of all kinds and would have a more natural fit at CCCC. What does MLA offer this population? We're really thinking hard about the barriers of contingent faculty participation at MLA, aside from the fact that it is quite literature focused and that doesn't mean that contingent faculty are not teaching literature but they're teaching it to perhaps different populations than are usually represented by faculty members at MLA, et cetera. We think about the barriers being the expense involved in attending the conference, and also the relevance. How can we make this conference more relevant?

One of the things that we are thinking about long term is advocating to the council—the acronym is CELJ, I think it's the Council of Editors of something in Journals—to be open to start shifting their academic journals to publishing shorter pieces. Contingent faculty members have a difficult time producing even a 25-to-40-page academic journal article. What about a 10 page one? What about a cluster that is linking 18th-century literature to pedagogy in the first day writing classroom? Really asking journal editors to reconsider what it means to produce scholarship and what different forms that can come into. I'm chairing the committee the year after next. Thank you. I'm really looking forward to pushing my own agenda, which I'm going to keep close to my chest for now, but that is thinking creatively about how to reward contingent faculty scholarship, how to recognize it and how to get more contingent faculty who are interested in doing that sort of writing, how to get them published.

SW: Your educational background is in English and Spanish literature. Can you talk more about how this background and your expertise in the Spanish Civil War informs your approach to teaching first year writing?

LHV: Yeah, I love that question. I am a modernist, a very proud modernist, and I make my living by teaching writing. These tend to be considered to be quite far-afield notions. I do have to admit that I sometimes feel as if I have two selves. There's the scholarship modernist self, and there's this teaching experimental pedagogical self. One way that we're reconciling them is just this fall at the Modernist Studies Association. I'm presenting on a round table called "Modernism and First-Year Writing." I'm really hoping that that becomes a feature of that conference because with modernist studies being no longer a hiring field, there were no ads that mentioned modernist studies last year. Some fields are going to have to start getting creative about how they keep themselves alive when folks aren't being hired in them. One way to do that is by interrogating the connection between modernist literature, scholarship, et cetera, and first-year writing in my own scholarship.

I specialize in the Spanish Civil War 1936 to 1939. Within that I study the British and American women writers who went to Spain and reported on the war. I also write about women photographers like Gerda Taro, who went to Spain and photograph the war. How that creeps into my first-year writing classroom is I think it's really fun. For one thing, these writers and these photographers, the majority of them—and by majority I mean like 95%. Yes, there were others who advocated the opposite—but a lot, almost all of them were advocating for foreign intervention in the Spanish Civil War. That brings them into this fascinating rhetorical position that I love to present to my students because here they are trying to make this event that is happening in Spain relevant and urgent to foreign audiences. The fascinating thing is, how are they doing that? And they're not successful either. That is, I think students have misconceptions about rhetoric. Being successful means that you achieve your end and that is not always the case. Rhetoric can still be extraordinarily successful without making change happen in the world, and that's a fascinating discussion to have with students. It creeps in by, for example, a real emphasis on visual culture. In my first-year writing classroom, we spend a lot of time looking at what one would call committed photography, the photography that is happening in war zones or humanitarian crises, to talk about framing and to talk about how these images urge the viewer to do something.

One of my favorite lessons though is that I have this award-winning collection of Spanish Civil War ephemera. It's all behind me in boxes and its pamphlets and handouts that would happen at union meetings and all kinds of really small things that would otherwise have been discarded that I've collected over the past 20 years. I bring out the best of these pieces to my classroom, usually when students are learning about the rhetorical triangle. I present a little history of the Spanish Civil War, a little historical context, and students, particularly in the 21st century, particularly today, understand in a way that is both sad and relevant, the fascism element, this urgent political moment in which these pamphlets were produced. Then they analyze them, and it's really cool. I mean, the students are agog to be holding something that's 80 years old and they're looking at it. They're also incredibly surprised that they recognize tropes that they see every day in their own communication and their own engagement with the news. It gives them a sense of

communication continuity over the decades, and that these are questions that humans have been wrestling with for a long time. It also gives a sense to them that there are no pat answers. We talk about how these sorts of rhetorical appeals have evolved from the 1930s to today. Those are some of the ways that the Spanish Civil War sometimes is coming in, in terms of here are pamphlets from Spain, talk about them as artifacts, and what they're doing, but also just as a background for activism, a background for intervention, for being aware of one's position in the world. That's really motivated me and inspired me.

SW: Your teaching and research interests also include mindful based approaches to teaching. Can you talk about what this looks like in your first-year writing class and what scholarship has helped inform your practices?

LHV: Yeah, I love this question. I'm going to be really curious to find out for myself how this contemplative writing approach translates into Johns Hopkins because it's evolved for me as a really sort of site-specific Georgetown practice. In fall 2019, I participated in a dinner discussion group called Teach to Mission. In that dinner discussion group for faculty and staff, there were about 11 of us from across the university, we and a Jesuit who I guess would be staff. We read *The Jesuit Guide to Almost Everything* by James Martin and discussed. And in that dinner series, I was introduced to the Ignatian Examen, which is a cornerstone of Jesuit life. Jesuit priests are asked to practice the exam twice a day. Once at noon, and then once before bed, one gives Thanksgiving, one invites the Holy Spirit in, one reviews and recognizes failures. One asks for forgiveness, and one plans ahead to the future. I found it to be very grounding. I found it to be very predictable.

I discovered a book also written by a Jesuit called *Reimagining the Ignatian Examen* that takes these steps and offers 30 different versions of them focused on different themes of life or different sort of moments. I said to myself, "We always know that those first 10 to 15 minutes of class are a transition. What if I really marked it as a transition, and I brought in more contemplation?" I asked students to spend that time in reflection in different ways. In spring 2020, I started my experiment, and I planned out different contemplative exercises such as going through one of Tito's versions of the Examen. I have to say that I edited his Examen to not have mention of God, not have mention of the Holy Spirit because for some individuals, the word God can be quite loaded. Not for most, but for some. I wanted it to seem like an accessible practice, and I didn't want it to feel like I was proselytizing something because I genuinely was not. Either doing an exam or engaging in other sort of meditative exercises, they would have a prompt on the board that said, "Write a letter to your future self as a junior about something you want to remember that happened this week." Experimental things like that, that allowed them to slow down. I had them listen to a sound bath for ten minutes, which was their first experience with that.

When Georgetown went online after spring break, the students found the contemplative aspect of our class to be one of the things that was really holding them together. They were so touched and moved and appreciative of the sort of transition. I found that because I allowed for the sort of reflective space, they were a little bit more ready to work in the classroom. They had had a time to shut out what was happening on the outside and have a legit transition into our work, the moment. I kept it going and I became super interested in what other people have written. *Yoga*

Minds, Writing Bodies: Contemplative Writing Pedagogy by Christie Wenger is one of the books that I read through. I realized that there is a growing strain in writing studies about embodied questioning, like embodiedness and what that means for writing. Another one that I looked into is *Teaching with Tenderness: Toward an Embodied Practice* by Becky Thompson. This approach is starting, is evolving not just for me, but for I think the field and pulling strands from compassionate pedagogy, racial justice, gender studies with embodiment. I think it's still trying to find itself and experiment and stuff, and it's very exciting. But in a practical way, for my students at Georgetown, because it is a Jesuit university, there is this driving force that we talk about called personal care for the whole person. That's how I introduced it to the students, is that I care about your whole self. You are bringing your whole self into the classroom and you're writing with that whole being. Let's pay attention to that for a few minutes and use that as a way to get down to work and think about it.

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