Episode 98: Laura L. Allen
Pedagogue podcast
Transcript

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

In this episode, Laura L. Allen talks about race and technology, professional writing, myths about literacy, and the rhetorical practices of Black family reunions.

Laura L. Allen, PhD is a committed teacher and scholar whose research explores race at the intersections of professional writing, digital media, family literacy, and community literacy. She currently works as Assistant Professor of Writing and Rhetorics of Advocacy at York University in Toronto, Ontario. Her current project explores the role of digital and professional writing in the planning and sustaining of Black Family Reunions across North America. Laura has presented at several national and international conferences, including the Conference on College Composition & Communication (CCCC) and the Humanities, Arts, Science and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory (HASTAC). Laura is a recipient of the 2020 Critel Digital Media Fellowship, the 2018 Digital Pedagogy Lab Fellowship and was selected for the CCCC Scholar for the Dream Award for 2019. Laura earned a PhD in English from the Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy program at The Ohio State University. She earned a BA in English from Spelman College and an MA in Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing from Michigan State University. Laura is committed to both educational and social justice, and she continues to be inspired by her students. When she is not writing, researching or teaching, Laura can be found spending time with family and friends, listening to podcasts or live music, and learning to play new instruments.

Laura, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your teaching and research explore race at the intersections of professional writing, digital media, and family and community literacy. How did you get interested in this work and what does this look like in the classroom?

LLA: Sure, so my entry into teaching writing and writing studies is something that I cannot really separate from race and culture studies, because I was introduced to the field at an HBCU. I was attending Spelman College and at the time I think I actually was interested in going into management or business and organization, something like that. I was an English major, though, but I was like, "I love to write, but I don't know if I'll be able to really make anything out of this. So, I think I'll have this minor on the side," but fortunately I had several classes with Margaret Price, and she would look at some of the work that I was doing, some of my writing, and say, "Hey, did you know that there's a whole field that explores this particular idea?" I was like, "Oh, really?"

So, we would have conversations, and really, after I graduated, I was actually working at Target for a while, but I would always visit campus. And Margaret helped me to explore graduate programs and I eventually ended up at Michigan State. Particularly the program at the time was a Master of Arts in Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing. I think they have changed the name since then, but at the time I decided, "Okay, I will do this and maybe I'll venture into some writing related career right after, and that will be that." Never had any plans of going into academia initially, but I think during that time at Michigan State, I came across some really great work, some really interesting ideas around race and technology and it just stuck with me. I became really interested in narratives around the digital divide and particularly how that just did not align with my story, with how I grew up.

I didn't see myself and my family's experiences in this very persistent narrative about how Black folks and people in rural communities, how they were technologically "illiterate," was the language they were using at the time. I knew that I wanted to explore that more. So, eventually I found my way back after going into industry for a while, I found my way back to academia and decided to really explore the relationship between race and technology and the language around that, to get a better understanding of what other kind of narratives can we create, what other kind of narratives already exist, and what kind of work can we do to really amplify the rich digital literacy practices, particularly of Black communities and Black families, because I knew that work was needed and I knew that work was out there. That was my goal and my entry way into this field.

SW: So, you teach a couple of classes at York University in Toronto, Ontario that bring together race and language and technology. One is called "Activist Rhetorics" and the other is called "Race, Culture, and Professional Writing." Can you talk about these classes and some pedagogical goals and maybe share some readings or assignments that help students engage with race and technology?

LLA: So, these courses that I have had the opportunity to teach here at York, they have been just some of my favorite courses to teach, particularly at this time. There's so much to pull from what we see in the news, what we see on social media, what we see just in our everyday lives right now. So, particularly, "Race, Culture, and Professional Writing," that course was such a joy to teach because students were really interested in exploring, "Okay, how do we talk about race? What are the words that we use when we're referring to different groups? How do I not get canceled?" To be honest, that was what students would come into the class wondering, "Okay, I want to make sure that I'm talking about this group correctly."

Of course, we would talk about all kinds of theories of approaching the writing. So, for example, just talking about their positions as amplifying voices and not necessarily always talking about a particular group, but that was always enjoyable because I think it's such a safe space for students to be able to bring some of their hesitancy when it comes to writing about different groups and bringing what they have understood in the past and learning that called culture always shifts, culture always changes, and they need to understand that first and foremost. They need to

understand that they need to constantly be readers and understand what particular groups are experiencing and what they prefer at the time.

This particular class had assignments really around these ideas of corporate social justice, well, the more popular term is corporate social responsibility. So around the time that Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd, there were so many companies and organizations who had these social media posts and different kinds of press releases about that moment during all those protests. That is something I really wanted to bring into the classroom. I said, "Okay, this is race, culture and professional writing using digital media right in our faces, how do we start to analyze these different statements?" What would happen if a student is working for an organization and they need to be a part of the team that's crafting writing like that? What can they contribute? What can they add? And so that was, those are really interesting assignments.

Students were very critical most of the time because the first part of that assignment was analysis. But then the second part is composition. So what happens when you have to compose your own statement about where your company stands? So, I created a fictional company that was…I think it was a fictional technology company, and I had students create and write a corporate social responsibility, social justice statement. What would they say are the company's beliefs about a particular topic? And it's hard, and that assignment is really short. I love short writing assignments. It was just something that I told the students, this is what I would want you to write if you're writing an Instagram caption, or if you're writing a small part on a corporate website, how do you convey what you need to convey and be genuine and honest, and really reflect your company's values, your nonprofit values, whoever the company is that they were writing on behalf of?

And so, those are some of the ways that I bring together race, culture, and technology in the classroom. It's always a great experience for students. I think that it's a great experience for me too. I've learned so much, especially being here at York, where there are so many different kinds of students. There are adult learners and there are traditional college students. And it has been such a pleasure to teach at a university where students are coming from all over the world. So, they teach me so much about race, culture, and professional writing, and they're really breaking down, I think, what my US-centric ideas of what is possible, and I love that. So, it's really helping me to reframe my teaching in that way, too.

SW: You mentioned students were critical of organizational social justice statements. I think you said, in particular, they questioned whether they were genuine and honest. I imagine that this led to some rich conversations about ethics and possibly even capitalism and kairos. Do you mind talking more about what those conversations looked like with students in class?

LLA: Absolutely, one of the companies that I used as a model company is Ben & Jerry's. Ben & Jerry's, they care so much that they do not care. I know every company has their flaws and issues, but Ben & Jerry will literally put out an Instagram post that says, "Dismantle White supremacy right now." And we were like, "Wait, I thought this was about ice cream." And

they're like, "No, these issues are still very important to the work that we do and the people who work for us." And so, if you scroll through Ben & Jerry's website, their Instagram page, they even have several different Instagram pages or websites depending on the country. So, for example, Canada has its own website and then the US has its own. So, they actually create content that's geared toward the issues at particular location.

And they are very direct, very genuine. They support much of their content with facts. They talk a lot about prison reform. They talk a lot about the issues with voting, for example, voter suppression and how Black and Indigenous and Latinx communities are the first to experience that sort of oppression. They're very direct in that way. I like to use them as a model company. I'm looking for others, but it's difficult because as you stated, students read these messages from these other companies and go, "Okay, I feel like they're saying this just to sell the product or just because it's popular right now." So, we talk about what makes them say that, what in the writing gives them those vibes, what in the writing makes them feel like this company might not be genuine or might not be honest.

And we talk about templates because that's a lot of what we saw when George Floyd was murdered, is just these template responses. What would it mean to break out of that? And so, it definitely fostered some really interesting discussion. And fortunately, I think, well, hopefully in this next season of teaching this course, I'll be able to bring some folks in that I've reached out to, a couple of people who work in those departments so we can get a better idea of what is the thinking behind these messages and what are some of the different kinds of obstacles that these writers might encounter as they prepare these for the companies that they work for. I'm really excited for students to be able to maybe be more generous. Maybe generosity might not be warranted here, but it will be interesting when they know the challenges that some of these writers may come across.

SW: Laura, it sounds like your approach to teaching also requires you to dismantle some commonplace notions and perhaps misunderstandings about writing, language, and literacy. What are some myths about literacy that you attempt to deconstruct in your classes, and what do you want students to better understand about reading and writing and composing?

LLA: So much of my training around literacy studies is central to my work with Beverly Moss. Beverly Moss was my dissertation chair, and I had the opportunity to take literacy courses with her at Ohio State and I learned so much at that time. One of the really important points that I want students to walk away with is understanding that literacy is complex. Literacy has so much more to do with just reading and writing. Many times we're talking about what reading is valued, what writing is valued. And then the where is also very important. And many times students understand literacy as something that just exists in the school setting. You learn it in school, you practice it in school, and because I had the opportunity to work with Beverly Moss and to learn more about community literacies, I became really interested in learning, "Okay, what does literacy look like outside of institution and school settings, and how can I better help students to

see those literacy practices happening and to explore them and to value them and to work with them?"

So, that's one of the areas that I really try to focus on in my teaching and in my research and sometimes that can be difficult depending on...teaching is about learning, but I've learned in these past couple of years that teaching is also about unlearning in many ways. And that can be really challenging, but it's rewarding when you can craft an assignment or craft a reading discussion and students are able to see, "Okay, so I can look at this practice that happens in my family, where we all write about this particular thing as a literacy practice that is to be valued, that is to be cherished, that is to be cultivated, that is to be sustained." And of course, culturally sustaining pedagogies, I had an opportunity back at Michigan State and Ohio State to take courses with Django Paris, Tim San Pedro, and that informed so much of my teaching.

Learning about culturally sustaining pedagogies informs so much of what I do. It even informs just my interest in family literacies and family research because so much of culturally sustaining pedagogy or culturally sustaining composition pedagogy, I think has to do with the communities and homes of students. How can we integrate that more into classroom spaces? I'm really interested in exploring that more and figuring that out in my teaching and the lessons. And those are always my favorite moments in the classroom.

SW: This is my last question. Your current project explores the role of digital and professional writing in the planning and sustaining of Black family reunions across North America. I would love to just give you some space to talk more about this project and your motivations behind it.

LLA: This project, it's really interesting how it came about. I was actually talking to my sister and another relative about making or creating an app for our family reunion. So, it was completely not related to anything that I was doing in graduate studies, but I was like, "You know what? We have to figure out a way where everyone can communicate that's centralized because not everyone has Facebook, not everyone uses email, and what can we do that can help everyone to be on the same page?" And so, we were working on that. We're still working on that. But through working on that, I was like, "Okay, let me see what I can find about this topic. Is there any research on this topic about family reunions and digital technologies?" I came across this one article, it was way back in 2006, it was a magazine article about how Black family reunions are entering the digital age and how families are creating websites.

I was like, "Yeah, my family's doing that, too." I really started to think about it. I was like, "Wait a minute, this is it." This is a project right here because Black family reunions are something that hasn't been studied as much, particularly in literacy studies or rhetoric and composition studies. But they are rich. Many families have these reunions, have had them for years. I think my family, we are on our 79th reunion. They do not have anything to do with school. They don't have anything to do with work. They really don't have much to do with church even though a church or religious spaces might be used, yet families were doing really interesting things with literacy, with reading, with writing, with digital technologies. I was like, "I've got to explore this."

So, that was much of my dissertation project and what will be part of my book project. So, my book project right now tentatively titled *Kinship Literacies*. I'm looking at the ways that families read and write and use technology today. I'm thinking of this as a, what would *Ways with Words* by Shirley Brice Heath, what would that look like today? If we're doing ethnography of literacy looking at families and their writing and technology practices in this era? So that's much of what my book project will be about.

But there are so many different areas, I think, of this field that this project touches. Something that will hopefully come out this year, yes, because we're in 2022. This year I'm working on an article with *Technical Communication Quarterly* in the Black technical and professional communications special issue. The article explores how these families use technical communication literacies to get the work of family reunions done. These families were crafting these meeting minutes and meeting agendas and family journals and family websites and all of this work happened to get the reunions together. We're not talking about small events. We're talking about events with up to 300-400 people sometimes. To see the families create these organizational structures and create these websites and create scholarship funds and social media pages and t-shirts, it was such a pleasure to see the technical communication practices happening there. And I was like, "This is something we can talk about in writing and tech comm and literacy. So, let me go ahead and put this into an article so this is available to study and to read and for undergraduate students and graduate students to be able to value the work of these Black families."

I'm really looking forward to continuing to do that work. Things have changed of course, families are not meeting as much in person, but I have absolutely been following some families on Zoom because they create different kinds of connections there. I won't get into this, but it makes me think of the work of Adam Banks or Andre Brock, because Zoom, it doesn't really understand its power, I guess, the fact that Zoom has meeting minutes and it still reminds me of Selfe and Selfe (1994) and the politics of the interface and how Zoom is sort of set up as this corporate space, almost this sort of white collar. We have to click leave meeting. That's not what everyone's using Zoom for.

So, it makes me think about the way that Whiteness is even embedded in something like Zoom technologies when we are using Zoom for many different reasons now, and actually have been, there are many people who've used it beforehand. But anyway, that's another article and another podcast interview for another day, but I'm really interested in continuing to explore the work these families are doing and explore what comes out of my research with them and just being able to observe and be a participant in those spaces.

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