

Episode 103: Laurie Cubbison

Transcript

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

In this episode, Laurie Cubbison talks about general education and the purpose of first-year writing, transfer and genre analysis, and national and local challenges to general education curriculum and reform.

Laurie Cubbison is Professor of English and Coordinator of the GTA/GTF Mentoring Program at Radford University, where she served as Director of the Core Curriculum from 2012 to 2017. Her research covers general education, universal design for learning, and online communities. She recently partnered with a friend to launch Lessons Learned In and Out of School, a Medium site aimed at managing work and career challenges for academics.

Laurie, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your teaching and research focus on general education curriculum development and reform. You served as the Director of Core Curriculum from 2012 to 2017 at Radford University. Given your expertise and administrative experience, I'm interested in starting our conversation with hearing your perspective on general education and the purpose of first year writing in the university?

LC: I suppose that my experience in gen ed causes me to lean into, instead of away from, first-year writing as a service course. There's always been this kind of tension within the field over that service designation, but I think there's value to that, especially in looking at it in relation to general education. I sort of see first-year writing as a counterpart to the introduction to the university classes that are often run through student success or new student programs, that sort of thing, that are introducing students to the academic side of the university.

I see it as a foundation for academic success within the context of their general education program, their major. There's a lot of setup, I think, that goes on in first-year writing, even apart from the writing instruction. So how I approach first-year writing has a lot to do with making those connections explicit to students, "Okay, here's what you're going to write and here's how that connects to what you're going to write in your history class, in your philosophy class, in your marketing class, in your engineering class," going to always trying to make that explicit.

SW: So to follow up with your approach to teaching writing, I'm curious as to what this looks like more specifically. Does this mean you're drawing on writing across the curriculum or writing in the discipline or teaching for transfer or genre pedagogies? Maybe you could give us a closer look into your first-year writing classroom, including with some assignments and/or readings.

LC: So transfer is important, and when I was trying to figure out a terminology to use to describe my pedagogy, in some ways, it's kind of "cognitive genres." I want students to think through how a particular genre works as a way of thinking through the problems that they're likely to deal with in other courses. I tend to focus on complexity, especially in my research running class, on problem solving, focusing on wicked problems and how those might show up in their major. Another goal of mine, it is connected to that introduction to the academic side of college, has led me to universal design for learning. I'm particularly interested in executive function as having a major role in student success. I find that most first semester students in particular struggle with managing their time and organizing their work. Some of it's due to learning disabilities. Others just lack experience and organizing their own work, or they struggle with the difference between how their high school and college courses are set up. I've been working a lot on my instructional design in terms of things I can do on my end to support student time management, their ability to find materials in the learning management system, that sort of thing. I guess I would sum it up as genre, critical thinking in ways that are oriented toward complexity and complex problem solving, and instructional design that supports universal design for learning.

SW: You mentioned transfer as one key aspect of your approach to teaching. Do you have conversations with students in first-year writing about what transfer means? I'm interested in how you go about those conversations. For example, are these conversations on how to transfer genre knowledge and/or how to transfer habits and skills that can lead to success in other disciplines, or do you bring in and analyze and ask students to compose various disciplinary genres in first-year writing? It almost sounds like maybe you move beyond typical first-year writing assignments.

LC: I think how I present an assignment to a class is very often aimed not just at my class, but...say I'm having an analytical assignment, they have to write an analytical essay, and I'm doing a rhetorical analysis for that particular assignment. I would frame it in ways where, "Okay, this is the kind of analysis that you're doing for me. But when you do an analysis essay, an analytical essay for this other course, here are the parts of this thinking and writing that you will do there. The terminology that you're looking for and using will shift, but the mental processes that you go through will transfer, will be very similar."

SW: I'm interested in hearing your thoughts on some current national and/or local challenges colleges and universities are having to navigate when it comes to gen ed. Are there future directions you would like to see English departments and programs take up when it comes to general education reform?

LC: Well, the challenges at both levels are political, but political in different ways. At the local level, it's the university politics of competition for resources. I include under that, credit hours, classroom space, faculty lines. There's intense competition between general education and the departments that tend to teach general education courses, the humanities and sciences, with the professional programs, say the nursing program or the engineering programs. And often, that competition is coming from the effect of the accreditation organizations for those professional

programs. They're saying for the professional programs, "You need so many hours of this kind of instruction in your program." And they're looking at gen ed as the place to find those hours. They want to call credit hours away from general education and put it in the professional programs. But meanwhile, the humanities are saying, "That's how we find our majors. Our majors come from students who take our courses as part of their area or requirements, that menu system. And if you take that away from us, our departments will die."

And you see...Inside Higher Ed this morning there was another university getting rid of its Philosophy major. And so that's one of the ways that that competition is playing out, that politics is playing out at the local level. And then the politics for public universities plays out really with the state legislators. I don't think that we necessarily, as writing people, recognize the extent to which...funding decisions may not be made at our university, on our campuses. They may be made in the state capital. So understanding where resources come from and how the politicians at the state level are directing resources is vital, I think, to understanding how gen ed is going to play out on our campuses. And then add to that, various states are working on refining transfer equivalencies between institutions, from community colleges to the state universities, and trying to make sure that...

Say the dual enrollment community college course that this student took through their high school is going to be accepted at the R1 university that they then attend. Well, some of the R1 universities don't want to accept that community college school enrollment course taken through the high school, but it's being sold by the governor and legislators to parents as, this is a way to reduce the cost of your child's college education. So there's the funding element of what's going on at the state level, and then there is, of course, the ideological element of what's going on at the state level, which we've been seeing for the past few years of, "Well, we don't want CRT to be taught, we don't want this to be taught." The most recent election in Virginia here, critical race theory was an objection. And we are seeing that show up in various states where state legislatures are mandating curriculum, and they're starting at the K12 level, but don't be surprised if it's at the higher ed level as well. There's a local politics, and then there's the context of local politics within the state national politics.

SW: Laurie, I imagine there are teachers listening who are resisting and fighting against local and national challenges and curriculum mandates and changes. Clearly there's a lot of power at play here. I imagine there's also people listening whose department funding and/or program credit hours just got cut, and they're trying to figure out what's next in terms of teaching, but also maybe looking outside teaching and colleges and universities. Is there any advice or encouragement in the midst of these crises? What would you say to the writing teacher who might find themselves in one of these situations, who might be discouraged, and who might be thinking, "What and how much can I actually do?"

LC: Well, I would say that the most important thing for writing people, writing studies / composition people, to do, whether you're a WPA or not, absolutely if you're a WPA, is to get involved with whatever committee administers general education on their campus. Because of

the way that first-year writing has developed in this country, it has a block of hours, block of credit hours that is fairly well accepted most places, that the students need first-year writing. And odds are, although this is one of the places where the conflicts have played out, now, we just lost our two-course sequence to a gen ed reform. We've got our first course as a foundational writing class, but our second course is one of a set of writing intensive courses students can take, and they have to have one of them on the upper level, 300-400 level.

So when that came up, we were kind of worried about our program, thinking, how is this going to affect us? How is this going to affect our instructors? Well, the truth is, there aren't that many departments that want to be responsible for the lower level writing intensive course. And they're telling their majors, "Go ahead and take that one. We'll give you another writing intensive course for a senior seminar or in the upper division of the major." But there are departments that are saying, "No, we want all of our major's writing intensive requirements in our major." Well, one of the things that's changed within the past 15 years with gen ed reform is a shift away from the idea of the core curriculum. With a core curriculum, you've got a set of courses that all of the students have to take. Ours was a first- and second-year undergrad courses integrating written and oral communication, critical thinking, and information literacy. I miss that program. There were a lot of strengths to it, and I felt like it really developed students writing, but it was expensive in terms of resources.

So what we've moved to kind of goes in the other direction and brings in minors for the major areas, like the traditional science, social science, humanities. Students here can now take a minor that will satisfy those areas. It was sold as a way for the professional program to participate in gen ed because it added an applied learning area and eliminated the traditional menu style gen ed that probably you took as an undergrad, I took as an undergrad. Basically, it's been kind of the model for a long time. What I saw when those discussions were happening was that the professional programs were exerting their power, getting back to the idea of power and the university politics, in ways that the traditional liberal arts departments couldn't match.

SW: How are students experiencing this model and shift away from the traditional GEC structure in your institutional context at Radford University?

LC: They seem fairly positive, but it's here at the beginning so it's hard to tell whether or not that will stay positive in a year or so. But I think they do have a sense that they have more choice. We have a lot of minors now, and the departments with gumption, who might have been expecting to get their majors through the menu system, are figuring out how to attract students through working with each other to develop really interesting minors. We have a health humanities minor now, for instance, that students can take, and it can not only meet some of the writing intensive requirement, but also the requirement for expression.

Looking at what our fellow departments, English is going pretty well, especially with the writing intensive courses that we offer and the willingness of other departments to have us offer those writing intensive courses through our second semester first-year writing, through our creative

writing course, our professional writing courses. What I'm seeing happen with some of the other programs is that they're seeing the minor as a way to keep themselves relevant and serve more students more deeply than they could have with gen ed, but not as deeply as they would've had with say two or three majors in a given cohort.

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