Episode 146: Leigh Gruwell
Pedagogue podcast
Transcript

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

In this episode, Leigh Gruwell talks about teaching at Auburn University, digital rhetorics and digital publics, feminist rhetorics, and new materialist rhetorics.

Leigh Gruwell is an associate professor of English at Auburn University, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in writing and rhetoric. Her research centers on digital feminist and new materialist rhetorics as well as composition pedagogy and research methodologies.

Leigh, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You teach at Auburn University. Talk to me about your institutional context and your approach to teaching writing.

LG: Yeah. First, I'm happy to be here again. This is really fun. Auburn is a school, it's an SEC school. It's an R-I school, so it's kind of an interesting context. It's also a pretty STEM heavy school, lots of engineering students, it's pretty well known as an engineering school. So I guess it depends on the kind of classes that I'm teaching will really dictate the kind of students that I get. It's a pretty wide swath. So this semester I'm teaching a first year writing class and I'm teaching an honors first year writing class. So I have a lot of engineering students, some pre-med students. I have an aviation student because that's a major that we offer at Auburn. So I have a lot of STEM type students, particularly in a first year writing course. And then moving up into, we have a public and professional writing major in the English department.

So the students obviously are kind of more writing oriented by virtue of their choice and major. And then moving up to graduate students, which I will get everything from graduate students in rhetoric and composition, to creative writing, to literature students. So it's a pretty wide swath of students that we encounter, or that I encounter at least. And of course, that's going to shape how I approach teaching the class. I'll start by talking about first year writing because I think that might be one of the more difficult teaching contexts that I encounter. And I am fortunate that I do get to teach first year writing on a pretty regular basis. I know a lot of folks, once they get into having tenure and they are teaching in a writing major or graduate program, they don't teach first year writing all that often. But I really like doing it because it's hard.

It's a challenge. You have more students, it's a lot of writing to respond to. And like I said, in my case, most of the first year writing students I encounter are not interested in writing. They don't want to be there. It's a checklist item. It's something they have to get done so they can move on to the content courses, the courses they really want to take. So in a class like that, the challenge is first of all, reminding students that writing is not something that's just relegated to English courses. They're going to continue to write in their major regardless of what that major is. So we talk a lot about disciplinary contexts of writing, and we talk about genre and we talk about how

writing does stuff in the world and how genres are ways of doing things in the world, in a professional context, in a particular disciplinary context.

I guess it's helpful that my husband is an engineer because I bring up his work a lot, and I think that gives me some credibility with my STEM students because I can talk specific examples of here's an electrical engineer does a lot of writing in his job. So yeah, my first task is to really just kind of convince them that writing is not something that is going to be ending for them in a first year writing class. They're going to continue to encounter it. And to remind them that they're not going to learn everything they need to know about writing in my class that they need to. So giving them the tools to have that rhetorical awareness and that metacognitive awareness of how do I understand this discourse community? How do I recognize the kind of rhetorical situation? And pay attention to what my audience is expecting and how I can use all the tools at my disposal to get there.

But then we also talk a lot about writing, recognizing the writing skills that they already have and helping them recognize that, again, they do writing all the time, even they don't want to think about texting or emails or even posting TikToks or whatever as writing. But I teach a lot of digital rhetoric, so I'm happy to consider that as valuable kind of composing background. So in a first year writing class, it's kind of just getting them to recognize writing as this really complex everyday thing that does work in the world, and it is not as easy as it sounds. That sounds like a very simple goal to reach, but it can be really difficult. I'm not sure that I've solved how to do that with every student, but yeah, once you get into classes in our major, it's a little bit easier. Students already recognize that writing is important. They imagine futures for themselves that involve writing, not just in their major but beyond.

SW: You teach an undergraduate class on digital rhetorics and a graduate course on composing and digital publics. I would love to hear you talk more about your digital rhetorics class and some objectives. Maybe you could frame that class a bit and then talk about a specific assignment.

LG: Yeah. That's one of my favorite classes to teach, I think I've taught it three times now. Which is usually about where you start to find a stride in a course after three times. That's also where I get antsy and I want to start redesigning it. So we'll see what happens next time I teach it. Yeah, so it's a special topics class that I've taught as digital rhetorics, and it's a class that we offer in our public and professional writing major. So I normally get mostly PPW students in there, but sometimes I'll get literature creative writing students because they have to take a handful of our courses for their major as well. And yeah, the class, the way I designed it, I really wanted to focus on understanding basic theories and principles and concepts of digital composing. So we do a lot of work of just reading stuff and talking and doing academic kind of writing about the disciplinary conversation. And defining digital rhetorics and understanding those kind of key concepts that I think are important to the field.

And then we move into production, which is I think where the students really have a lot of fun. In that class... Well, maybe I can talk about two assignments in tandem because I think they work together nicely. So I think the second assignment in that class is a digital event tracing. So it's essentially building off of the work of Lori Greaves where her article on iconic graphic

tracking. We talk about that method and we use that as a way to kind of understand how things circulate in digital spaces and how circulation is such a central concept to digital rhetoric. And then what I asked them to do is basically use that methodology to trace some kind of event or meme or something online and make an argument about how it has become consequential through its circulation, how it has changed, and how it does work in the world.

I had a student, actually, one of my former students published a revised version of that in Queen City Writers. So it's a really cool assignment. But I think that preps them nicely for the final assignment in the class, which is that kind of more production oriented project. So it's called a digital activism project. So essentially it's a very open-ended kind of self-determined project. They choose something that they want to draw attention to or raise money for or generate some kind of change. And they essentially design the kinds of text, they identify an audience, they identify their purpose. And I think having studied a lot about circulation is helpful for them because I asked them to compose a circulation plan for their project. I don't require that they actually do it because I'm pretty respectful and aware of some of the risks that come with composing in digital publics.

I've written a lot about harassment and digital aggression. But I want them to think about what will happen should they choose to publish it. Many of them do. I don't require that they do, but many of them choose to. I want them to think about what's going to happen once it is outside their control and anticipate maybe some of that circulation and transformation, that often accompanies circulation. It's a really fun class. I get great projects out of that. I've had one student do a website that was a map of the state of Alabama, which it's shocking that this doesn't exist already, but you could click on the county and get information about how to register to vote in your county. Apparently there's not such, or there wasn't such a website that existed until she designed it. I had a student develop a Twitter campaign for mutual aid for trans youth. Just some really cool projects that have come out of it, and I'm really proud of the work that they've done, and I think the students are pretty proud of the work that they've done too.

SW: Leigh, your research interest include feminist rhetorics and feminist research methodologies. Do you mind talking more about principles of feminist research methodologies and how you examine material and feminist rhetorics in digital spaces?

LG: Yeah. I think it's such a core kind of foundational assumption for me as a researcher. My undergraduate work is, I have a literature major, but I focused a lot. I took feminist theory courses, women's literature courses. So a feminist informed approach is so essential to my work. I brought it to the field that it feels like it predates my work in writing studies. For me, when I think about what feminist methodologies or feminist rhetorics are useful for, what they help us articulate, is power and giving us tools to understand how power is maintained, how it's circulates, how it's distributed, how we can contest it. It's an analytic tool, but I think that's also an activist tool for creating change in the world. And ultimately that's what feminist rhetorics are aiming for is to kind of re-equitably orient power. So the other thing that I think I'm drawn to feminist rhetorics or that it has been important to me when I think about feminist rhetorics is it's also it's emphasizing embodiment.

Gender has traditionally been just understood as a bodily performance, and it's distributed through our bodies. Not just gendered power, but racialized gender or racialized power, sexualized power, all these kinds of different ways of thinking about power. It almost always intersects through the body, and I think that's a really helpful framework for recognizing how language, how rhetorical performances are always going to be located in a specific body that's going to have power being performed on it or intersected through it in some way. That's why I really like to think about feminist rhetorics in digital spaces because it's very easy. I think we as a field have recognized that we are not in fact disembodied in online spaces, but I think that's a very easy assumption to make, especially when you're looking at disembodied texts like Twitter post or an email or something where you don't physically see the body behind it.

But of course, we know writing is a product of an individual's experience in a society, intersecting with all these kind of societal pressures, power relations. But subjectivity matters, embodiment matters, and that for me is really valuable as a researcher of digital rhetoric because it helps me understand how I would argue that by looking closely at embodied experiences in online spaces, we can better understand how power works on the internet. That's kind of like, I think, the central underlying theme that unites my work. And that's why I just keep returning to feminist rhetorics because I think it's such a valuable analytical tool, methodological tool, activist tool. I think it really gives us a lot of work to do to create in these more active spaces, which is, I think, a goal that our field would share.

SW: Your book, Making Matters, was published in 2022. In the introduction, you argue that "Rhetoric is not an exclusively human product. Rather it emerges from the entanglements of actors, human or otherwise. You call this "new materialist rhetorics." I was hoping to give you some space to expand that definition and talk more about how new materialist rhetorics orients the field toward a more nuanced "understanding of agency as distributed among assemblages."

LG: Yeah. So maybe it will be helpful to give you a sense of why I wrote the book or the story of the book. So this is unrecognizable as such, but it did come out of my dissertation research where I was interested in agency embodiment in digital spaces. And while I had a very strong feminist perspective bringing into that research, it wasn't until I defended my dissertation that I actually really started reading more about new materialist rhetorics, and I thought, oh, this is what I need to do what I'm doing, and really understand how as actors online, we don't just have an agency as individual actors, that it's a distributed process, that the technologies that we interact with, our bodies, all of those things are going to shape what we're able to do as composers in online spaces. So I had to do a lot of reading, and I found new materialist rhetorics to be a really useful intervention in understanding, again, digital agency.

My concern as I read through the work in our field and beyond, there was not the kind of interest or attention to power that I bring to my work as somebody who does kind of intersectional feminist analysis. So I guess that was the sort of exigence of my book is saying, this is a really valuable tool for understanding power. Unfortunately, we're not really using it to that end, at least in the iteration of new materialist rhetorics that I was kind of engaging with. So that was my impetus, I guess, for writing the book, is to kind of unite feminist rhetorics, which have always been really attentive to the material, not just the body, but also material conditions, class, race, economic factors, all of those things. And feminist rhetorics also have a really broad tradition of

valuing different kinds of composing, not just writing or speaking, but crafting and even everyday artifacts like recipes or grocery lists or those kinds of things, scrapbooks.

So it seems to me that these two fields were really doing very similar work, and I hadn't really seen them be put into conversation yet. So that was really my goal, I guess, for writing the book. And to use these two areas, feminist rhetorics and new materialist rhetorics to articulate some of those how power works and how it's distributed among physical agents, but also digital agents like algorithms or digital actors that we see out there, platform design and all of that. So the book focuses on digital spaces, but it also focuses on physical acts. I have a craftivism chapter, which is talking about craftivism is craft plus activism, so incidents of craft being used towards activism. But I also talk about the way in which digital and material actors are kind of intertwined, and we can't really separate them, especially not in 2023. The fifth chapter in the book is about the women's march, and I think that's a really instructive example to understand how agency is distributed among human and non-human actors, but also among digital and physical actors.

If you think about a mass protest like the Women's March, and think about how people organized, it was not just analog, it was not offline. It was people in physical spaces using digital tools and vice versa. So those were the kinds of locations where I centered the book, and I really use these as a way to examine how to make the argument that by understanding the ways that power is distributed among these material assemblages of humans, non-human, physical actors, digital actors, that we can really begin to account for the way that power circulates online and offline too. But yeah, that was kind of the goal of the book, is to think about how material assemblages are useful lens to understand power. Power doesn't flatten in these assemblages, it's distributed unequally, and if we're able to use the tools of [inaudible 00:17:29] to kind of articulate the actors that populate a specific assemblage, I think we'll be able to better identify those inequities and rectify them. Ideally.

SW: What surprised you through the process of writing this book?

LG: Well, I think writing a book is just a constant process of being surprised and disappointed and confused. So there's lots of moments like that. I think maybe when I think about the biggest surprise of the process of writing the book or how that's reflected in the product, so the second chapter in the book is about investigating craft as a process, like a actual physical process of crafting and sort of how that's manifested historically. But I also talk about how rhetoric, classical rhetoric, and I'm meaning specifically western Greek classical rhetoric, has also been really invested in the idea of craft as a synonym for rhetoric. We thinking about rhetoric has being crafty or cunning or being kind of slippery in some way. So I use the terms Metis and Kairos and Tekne to talk about the ways that there's these kind of roots in crafty thinking that hold up, again, Western ideas of rhetoric or classical western ideas of rhetoric.

I wasn't intending to write that. That just kind of happened. I think it came out of my teaching actually, where I was teaching classical rhetoric concepts and thinking about technique and thinking about how it's this kind informed practice, but also thinking about it in terms of timeliness and the embodiment that Metis brings to it. Yeah, it kind of came out of my teaching. I wasn't expecting to talk about classical rhetoric in my book, but I really am happy that I did

because I think it strengthens the argument, excuse me, that kind of crafty thinking is beneficial because craft, again, foregrounds these assemblages with physical actors and human actors and how they work together to do something. Yeah, that was a surprising chapter. I didn't intend to write it. It was one of those things where it doesn't happen often for me as a writer, but sometimes you'll sit down and suddenly you have 10 pages of writing and you're like, oh, I didn't even know I had that to say. So that was maybe a surprise, I guess, in the process of writing it.

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