

Episode 32: Les Hutchinson Campos

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Les Hutchinson Campos about cultural rhetorics pedagogy, strategies for building an inclusive class community, social media, and privacy and surveillance.

Les Hutchinson Campos, Chicana with Yaqui descendency, is an Assistant Professor of English at Boise State University in the Technical Communication program. They currently serve their department as the Teaching Assistant Mentor for the Master's of Arts: Technical Communication program, Coordinator of Curriculum, and Anti-Racist Student Support Consultant. Often, their classes integrate service learning partnerships with community organizations to create digital infrastructures that promote cultural sustainability and social justice. Their scholarly research brings together cultural and digital rhetorics, particularly with a focus on integrating Indigenous methods/ologies that addresses accessibility, online safety, and sovereignty. You can read their work in *Computers & Composition*, *Kairos*, the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*, and in other books and edited collections, like *Social Writing/Social Media*.

Les, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Let's start by talking about your teaching, specifically how you embrace a cultural rhetorics pedagogy. For those unfamiliar with cultural rhetorics, do you mind providing a brief definition and then sharing how you practice cultural rhetorics pedagogy?

LHC: So, the way I was taught cultural rhetorics follows four sort of tenets of practice, and that's a really way we view research, but also just knowledge. And so, those four tenets are story, relationality, decolonization and constellation. There's no sort of ranking, all four of those things work together at all times. I'm going to go reverse. Constellation means putting together different forms of knowledge—when you're constellating like different kind of cultural approaches to rhetorics. So, at the heart of cultural rhetorics, we believe that all rhetoric is culture and cultural, and all cultures are rhetorical. So, when you're constellating, you're constellating different rhetorical traditions. And that decolonizes rhetoric, by saying there's not just the Western rhetorical tradition, that all of the other cultures throughout history have had rhetorical traditions. And so, really learning those and putting them together.

And so, that's a decolonial project, in that it's removing the colonial imposition that the Western rhetorical tradition is the only, or like the most preferred, rhetorical tradition. And it's decolonizing our knowledge, returning to indigenous epistemologies and respecting those, and the ways of being that those bring. And relationality is really understanding that all of these knowledges and all of us all coexist together. So, when you put those things into a classroom practice, you're really sort of challenging the traditions that most of us were educated within,

which is a primarily Western rhetorical tradition, right? And view of writing and all of that. So, one thing that I try to do is, really encourage students to become more metacognitively aware of their own knowledge and their own rhetorical traditions that they come to the classroom with already. So really, prioritizing the fact that you all have so much knowledge already.

You aren't necessarily here to have knowledge dumped into your brain, but we are sharing in a communal space of the classroom. And so, a lot of my assignments, especially early on in the semester, are about students reflecting on those knowledges. I've had an assignment where it's very land-based. So, what were the traditional knowledges and indigenous knowledges that you learned growing up in your homelands and how are those shaping the way that you've come to know where you are? So at MSU (Michigan State University), most of my students came from, at the closest different parts of Michigan and at the furthest other countries. And then in sharing those knowledges in group settings and group conversations, students learn, "Oh, I see how these rhetorical traditions are all over the place." And then we start to practice respecting everyone else's knowledges.

SW: My follow-up to that is, at least from my understanding, that through cultural rhetorics pedagogy students might potentially be feeling a sense of insecurity or uncertainty and/or also a sense of empowerment and agency. And to me, both those feelings can lead to good conversations. How do students perceive this approach to teaching writing?

LHC: Absolutely. Both of those things, I think, and maybe some other stuff, but definitely insecurity. And students are rarely encouraged to think like that, so they feel a little tentative or maybe nervous about, can I write about this? Is this valuable? And we have to have these conversations of course. And then that's where the empowerment comes from, because then they start to understand, "Oh my gosh, I do have this knowledge. I am a person with intelligence." You know, "I'm not coming to college, this kind of blank slate." Right, which is very Lockean understanding, but I'm here and I have stuff to offer this university and my world already and where they fit. And so they do feel empowered.

I've had, one of the last classes I taught which was like about a year and a half ago, I had a student who didn't realize she had Cherokee ancestry. She was a Black woman, and she was able to reconnect with her Cherokee family and bring those stories and traditions into the class for the first time in her life. Not only in college or academic settings, but in her own life. And she was crying during one of her presentations, when she was bringing her grandmother's medicine stick and sharing what that meant. And she just felt like she really came to know herself and her family in a deeper level, and that to me was a beautiful moment. I was crying along with her and many of the other students were, just because this happened because of that. And I felt very privileged to have been in that space with her while she made that happen.

I also think there's some resentment that students acquire because they realize, why wasn't this welcomed from the beginning? Why have I always been taught to like put away my knowledge and learn this other kind, instead of doing this sort of collaborative constellating work? And so

we have conversations about how colonization does that and why. And there's some bitterness there and I'm trying to help students work through those anger and those feelings while also acknowledging, you don't have to do that anymore. And find ways to push back and resist, whenever you come across that, in ways that don't hurt you. So, there's always that balance too.

I have a lot of students go, "Well, how am I going to do this in the universe... Or not in the university, but in my profession when I'm in a job? How do I push back against the boss when my life depends on it?" And so, we talk about context and rhetorical situations then and all of that, but yeah, there's a lot of emotions. It is definitely not easy work, so I have a lot of pushback too. Students go, "I don't want to do this, I need to learn how to be a professional. That's not valued here." And we have conversations about why, and some students don't want to do that. And trying to make space for that, too, and value that, while also acknowledging that's not necessarily the goal of this class, but you have every right to do what you want to do.

SW: Cultural rhetorics pedagogy focuses on community, how students see themselves, how they see their identity and their relationship within their communities, within the institution, within their interactions with peers in the classroom. Can you talk a bit about how you facilitate a space where students feel comfortable analyzing and engaging in decolonial conversations? Maybe you can share teaching practices that help you build this sense of community, comfortability, and dialogue.

LHC: This is sort of something that's an underlying theme in all of my classes, is the sense of community. So, I actually put that in part of my policies. That we will see this class as a communal space, where we value all of our knowledges, all of our identities, our ways of being and speaking. You know, and I really try to also say, we're not going to oppress one another with our language, so we have to be mindful and that sort of thing. So, I do that from the beginning on the very first day, I have that conversation with my students. The best way that I think to start that sort of sense with one another is by being vulnerable myself and sharing with my students, my own story.

I like to tell them... we talk about on the first day, what is this class? What are you hoping to get out of it? What do you, how do you write? What do you know about writing classes? And we just have those conversations, but I tell students, so I give them those policies and I explain what those mean. And then I tell them, I failed English 101, three times. And they just are always like, "What?" And I go, "And here I am teaching this class and this is my story of how I got here." And this is why I tell them I graduated high school, basically deemed illiterate, I didn't know grammar, I didn't know how to write a traditional academic essay. Even though I loved writing and reading, I wasn't trained correctly. And so then I say, I had to teach myself, and now here I am doing this.

And so I always use those moments at the beginning of class. I'll tell them what I'm up to, parts of my life, and really explain some sort of vulnerable or real experience. So they see me as a person. And so, I'm sharing with them and that encourages them to share. Usually, we have daily

in class assignments that are story sharing. So, storytelling is really at the crux of what this is, and that's how students come to see themselves and see one another as a community, is because we're always sharing stories. We're reading stories. I like to teach parts of Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories* and he's very vulnerable in that book. These are first year writing classes, by the way, I also teach technical writing, which is kind of different. But, I think it would be a disservice to everyone, if we expect the students just to want to be vulnerable and to trust. That is definitely something you build over time and not all students are going to do that at the same rate or time.

What I do is, that first assignment that I talked about earlier, where students reflect on the land where they come from and the knowledge that they have. Through certain assignments, so they write a draft. We read Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories* where he does that work, and then so they do that. And then we do workshops, so they have to share their stories. I always let them choose their partners so that they feel comfortable knowing who's going to be reading their work. And we have conversations, too. I let them know, "If you don't want to share what you've written, that is totally fine. Just talk with me and we'll figure something out." You know, there's no pressure, "You have to do this, this way." I try to be as open and understanding and inclusive as possible. And then throughout their other moments where they're going to educate one another, they have to do presentations.

And at every moment, they have the choice to do it or not. They can do an alternative assignment and they also, they're choosing what they're sharing. So they know upfront, I'm going to choose this, I'm going to write about this. I know I'm going to have to share this in front of the class. So, what do I feel comfortable with? And I tell them that too, this is something that you are going to be sharing either with three people, when we do a group workshop, or you're going to have to share this with the whole class in a few weeks. So just know that, choose something that you feel comfortable doing that with. We have lots of just conversations all the time about things. I've played games to sort of build community, too. I'm not so much of a game player, I've kind of borrowed that from a friend who does that work in his classes.

And so really just trying to make that space continuously open and just, "This is our space; we can be ourselves, we can be silly, we can mess up." Another way that I help build trust with students, and I don't know if this necessarily encourages them to be open with their stories, but it does make them feel safe is, I offer a revision policy. I have an open revision policy. So if they return something in and they get a grade back that they're not entirely happy with, they can always revise it. I don't care when it is, as long as it's finally turned in, we'll have a conversation about timelines and all of that. But yeah, they have that policy. I'm like, "Your grade is up to you. I want to help you succeed. It doesn't affect me, whether you fail or pass, but I know you need to pass. How can I help you? How can this classroom be made for you? I'm here for you."

SW: Your research focuses on social media, privacy and surveillance and data collection. In "Writing to Have No Face," your chapter in Social Writing/Social Media, which is open access on WAC Clearinghouse, you talk about anonymity and your experiences using multiple Twitter

accounts. And you write, "Not every Twitter user has the same privilege to participate in online conversations freely without consequences. Most of us have to account for our social positions, genders, politics, even our sexualities when we speak online. Therefore, anonymity is one way to protect oneself from the restrictions of speaking publicly as a regular, everyday person." How does this work on social media and anonymity apply to what you do in the writing classroom? How do you encourage students to think critically about privacy and surveillance?

LHC: I'm always wondering when I do research, how does this apply to the classroom and vice versa? So, that's something I'm just always teasing with and toying with. I've had students read that chapter before, and its various iterations before it was published and after. [*LHC to kid in audio: Thank you, love*]. But I also talk with them. A lot of them are really intrigued and participate in communities online and similar. [*LHC to kid in audio: Yes, it's spicy*]. I'll say this, before one of the first, first-year writing classes I taught at MSU, I didn't bring in privacy and surveillance at all, in the classroom. Except for one day, students asked me, "Well, what do you work on? What is your research?" And I told them and I kind of, it was one of our free days where we were just hanging out chatting. And I like to do that. I like to give like a day where we just read poetry and hang out.

It's usually during midterms week when I know all of my students are super stressed, again, another one of these like community building, like I see you, I know where you're at in your life, I know it's a mess. Let's use this classroom as a sort of self-care, chill space. And I bring in food and stuff. So we were hanging out talking and they wanted to know a little bit more about me, and I told them my work and they said, "Well, why aren't we doing that in this class? Like, I want to learn how to better protect myself online." And I was just like, "I never knew I could do that. I didn't know students would want that. I thought this was just my quirky interest." And they were like, "No, Les, your next class, you need to do this." And so I did, the last first-year writing class I taught at MSU, I did bring in privacy and surveillance as the theme. So I had them thinking about switching that first assignment to like, in what ways do you use online spaces? How did you come to use that space?

That sort of thing, so to get stories, sort of situated in that perspective. So in that way, they're already thinking about that. And I want them to tell me, because we all do have such different approaches and beliefs about how we own the content we create and what that means. And so, I have students read privacy policies, we have those conversations. So, they usually choose a site to do that, and they read the privacy policy and we have a conversation. And they educate us, the rest of the class and me, on in what ways does that site impact ownership of data and the things that we are creating in that space and what does that mean for our own agency? And so that's sort of their research focus for the class and they present two kinds of papers. Yeah, so I use that to not only have them critique these spaces for the ways that they might impact agency and ownership, but also they're having agency and ownership by knowing that information and teaching others.

And that is where I've found, to me, to reconcile my worries about surveillance and data collection, is by saying, this is all happening. There's not a whole lot we can do about it, right? It's really difficult to change a space, but the best proactive resistance we have is educating others about what the space like Facebook, what is Facebook doing? It's horrible. So, how can we teach others, "Be more cautious about Facebook because this is what it's doing to your information. This is how you are not an agent over yourself." Yeah, that is sort of how they all come together. Students, primarily, are really, they're intrigued. They feel like they learn a lot. Sometimes they're really scared, sometimes they're annoyed and bored with the assignment. It really depends. But, so then now that I teach technical communication, I've shifted to where they're educating other communities about these things. And they're also creating digital infrastructures that are more supportive of people and user's agency and rights to their own data.

SW: Do students talk about whether they have anonymous identities online and whether they feel a sense of ownership and agency through those social media accounts or handles?

LHC: I've had students create accounts. One created an anonymous like Bachelor and Bachelorette fan account. And she ended up becoming kind of a thing. Like very, I don't want to say famous, but she ended up having over a 100,000 followers and was really engaging and part of this community. So, she ended up starting kind of a whole online community on Twitter, through the Bachelor and Bachelorette. So the only thing that I do not do is force students to decide to do something. I'm not going to say "go"—there won't be an assignment where I make students create an anonymous account and do that work, because I also know there's a lot of risk involved. And so, I'm very upfront about that. That's where the conversations, "This has happened to me, I've been doxed. I've had all these things happen." I don't want to put you in that situation, but students do share that they do this.

And I don't make them disclose anything they don't feel comfortable. If they want to talk about something, they can. If they want to share what that identity is, they're free to. But there's no pressure or requirement to do that, on either way. You don't have to create something new, if you don't want to. You can just be a fly on the wall and study a community from the side. We talk about the ethics of that, you know, what does it mean to not engage, but just to pull data from people. In what ways is that not also surveillance, but yeah, they have the freedom and we have those conversations early on when they start those projects. How are you going to engage? What role are you going to play? And how can you best be safe while you're doing that work?

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