

Episode 54: Linda Adler-Kassner

Transcript

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

Before we get started, I just wanted to take a moment to say thanks for listening to the podcast. Pedagogue started in May 2019. I had this idea to start something that would amplify voices on teaching writing, so teachers talking about writing. I saw this podcast as another way to add to scholarship on composition pedagogy and theory but to do so in a different style and format, and to really focus on creating a space that promoted diverse perspectives from different institutional contexts. So a space where writing teachers could be heard. Thanks for following along and supporting the podcast, for listening and sharing episodes with your friends and colleagues. It really means a lot to me.

In this episode, I talk with Linda Adler-Kassner about literacy, threshold concepts, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), facilitating workshops with faculty across disciplines, and assessing WAC programs.

Linda Adler-Kassner is Professor of Writing, Faculty Director of the Center for Innovative Teaching, Research, and Learning (CITRAL), and Associate Dean of Undergraduate Education at University of California Santa Barbara. For more than 30 years, she's focused how different people define and act on ideas about "good writing" and "good writers," and on advocating for writing, writers, and learning. She's taught first year writing, writing and civic engagement, and graduate courses focusing on these issues. As a longtime writing program administrator, these issues were front and center in her WPA work; they now are front and center in work she does with faculty from all disciplines on equitable and inclusive teaching. Adler-Kassner is author, co-author, or co-editor of 11 books and many articles and book chapters.

Linda, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I want to start with a broad question about literacy, something a lot of your research centers on. How should we, as teachers, talk about literacy and define literacy within and beyond the writing classroom? What sort of approach do you suggest writing teachers take when trying to conceptualize literacy?

LAK: The way that I think about literacy is informed by so many people who have thought about literacy before me. The ability to analyze and make conscious decisions about participation and practices within specific contexts. And practices, in this instance, that are generally associated with composing and composed knowledge, and then the process of interpreting composed knowledge. So we could shorthand that as writing and reading. Literacy is a political act. It's one that's imbued with ideologies and values. It's one that's deeply situated in contexts and that everybody has to bring their identities to as we think about the boundaries of literacy and engage with it.

So that's how I think about literacy within the first year writing classroom. I have always thought about, worked with students, and worked with teachers who are teaching first year writing, to think about first year writing as an opportunity to really engage with the study of literacy and practices in specific contexts. Study of, and practice with, writing and reading and composed knowledge. So figuring out what are the ways that writing and reading happen in places? What does that look like? What values and ideologies does that represent? How are those aligned or not aligned with what you are and who you are and what you want to see happen? Things like that.

And really that extends beyond first year writing, when I work with faculty and other contexts as well. So the realization for faculty, or really for anyone, that there's no one kind of quote unquote good writing, that characteristics of writing and literacy are defined within contexts and do reflect those values and ideologies is really important. And then, making those practices and the expectations associated with them as explicit for everyone as possible is really important. Also, the idea that writing is the representation of a whole series of knowledge-making practices, that really start with epistemology and identity.

SW: Linda, let's talk about Naming What We Know, your research on threshold concepts. Can you define threshold concepts? And then, what do threshold concepts do for writing teachers, or how can threshold concepts help inform the work we do in the writing classroom?

LAK: The classic definition of threshold concepts is that they are concepts critical for epistemological participation in disciplines. But let's just put that in some words that don't have 93 syllables in them. Threshold concepts are the sort of foundational, formative ways that we understand meaning making, and knowledge-making to happen within disciplines. And when people don't think through or within those concepts, and really use them as the lenses that they apply to the kinds of questions they ask, evidence or data they collect, ways that they analyze or interpret that and then ultimately write about that, what they do is seem to be misaligned or not right. Or wrong, which is another way of saying not right.

So that's what threshold concepts are. A really accessible way to think about a threshold concept is if somebody were to say, "Writing is not a social practice. It's just not. It just isn't." And within our discipline, we're like, "No. That's absolutely not the case." Well, there's a threshold concept. Now, we understand that concept because we've become acculturated to understand that concept. We've been educated to understand it. So threshold concepts always represent dominant values and ideologies within the contexts where they're developed. And that can be a problem because they also, if they're taken as sort of absolute truths, then they just reify things, which is why it's so important to always push on them and think about where the limits of those concepts lie, where are new or emergent concepts that are coming in.

So we can never deny, I mean, you can never deny hegemony. Hegemony *is*. Raymond Williams would tell us that. At the same time, as people who are always conscious of the paradox of our dilemma, we work with people to study and practice composed knowledge, but the study and

practice of composed knowledge also represents, reflects ideologies and values. So again, that's a paradox of what we do.

We can also be very aware that threshold concepts do the same thing. I mean, one of the things that we've always been, are often been, really cognizant of as a discipline is that challenging paradox and wrestling with that in our own work. I think we can continue to do that. So there's...*Naming What We Know* was an attempt to sort of crowdsource and see if it was even possible to crowdsource defining some of these threshold concepts, not all of them, but some of them, that seemed to be operative within the research and practice of the discipline.

Our new book, *(Re)Considering What We Know*, really pushes on those and introduces new ideas, really examines some of the problematic assumptions that are baked into the idea of even naming what we know. It is always possible...so as a human being, I'm a sort of a hardcore pragmatist, which comes with its own ideological baggage. I know. And I'm also a person who, I've been in Cultural Studies my entire academic career, so I know, and I'm really practiced with taking apart the boundaries that lie around assumptions. At the same time, I'm very committed to action that improves conditions for learners and learning and teachers and teaching. And I know that those two things don't always go hand in hand.

So deconstructing is incredibly important and a really powerful activity, but if we only unwind and never build again, we don't move things forward. At the same time, every time we set a course of action, we are always including some things and excluding some things. So we have to be always cognizant of what that means and be as inclusive, and really sort of multiperspectival as possible so that we can make adjustments. Not commit to one course of action, but instead a sort of roly-poly course of action, so that we go...like always trying to include as much as possible, which takes a little longer, but does move us in a direction, if that makes sense.

SW: What got you interested in threshold concepts?

LAK: There's a great story there. So when I came to UC Santa Barbara in 2009-2010 I was hired to be the Director of the Writing Program, which I used to be, the Department Chair in Writing. I know that good writing program directors get to know the context where their writing programs are located. So the first thing I did was schedule meetings with all the department chairs whose graduate students taught in the writing program, so that I could understand the experience of their graduate students, but really it was just a wedge in to get to know them.

So I was talking to one of the department chairs, the person who has been the Chair of the History Department. And he said, "Do you know anything about assessment?" And I said, "Well, yeah. Yeah, I know a little bit about assessment." And he said, "I'm really interested in what makes students good historical thinkers." And instead of jumping up and down for joy and saying, "Oh my God, that's so cool." I said, "Wow, I'd be very interested in exploring that question with you." I should add a note here. I used to be a history teacher, and so I've always done lots of historical work.

So John [Majewski] and I started exploring this question. We did some work with a graduate student, a then graduate student at UCSB, surveying students in his class to learn more about their understandings of historical meaning-making and historical practice. And there's a lot of really, really excellent work in history around historical thinking, both in historiography and in history. I knew about that work and we read some more of it. And then I went to the Writing Research Across Borders Conference in DC, or at George Mason actually, in whatever year that was, 2011 maybe? Some colleagues of mine, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Kara Taczak, and Liane Robertson, mentioned threshold concepts in their presentation. I was like, "What? What is that term? That term is the thing we've been trying to access all this time."

So John and I, and Damian Koshnick, the graduate student we were working with, had been...I'm trying to remember the sequence of things, anyway, we were working on an article for *Composition Forum* at the time, I'm pretty sure. And then, I had to sort of go back and like morph that article so that it was like, now we have a name for this thing we're trying to say in this article. So that's how I learned about it.

SW: How do you see threshold concepts as a productive framework for Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC)?

LAK: I'm going to expand it out even more because I don't really define my role as a writing across the curriculum person. I'm more sort of faculty development, even more broadly. So sometimes that work involves thinking about writing. Mostly, that work always involves thinking about inclusive teaching. On my campus, I'm often working with faculty members who are teaching courses upward of 200 students. So between 200 and 700 students. So sometimes they do incorporate writing and sometimes they incorporate other things, but it's always thinking about inclusive teaching. And yes, sometimes threshold concepts can be a really useful name to attach to what they need to do. Sometimes they don't like that name.

So we always work with...that's always a framework I introduce, but let me take a step back and say, really when I work with faculty, I work with them to think about what are the constituent elements of expertise that they have that they can belong to those disciplines. What are the constituent elements of knowledge making in their disciplines, and how do they present those to students and make them explicit, provide opportunities for practice? So when I work with faculty to think about what we call this element of disciplinary knowledge, which is one element of a framework that is part of inclusive teaching practices, I'll introduce them to threshold concepts. And if they think that's a useful way to talk about it, great.

I'll also introduce them to other ways to think about those ideas. So there's another aligned framework for thinking about this called *ways of thinking and practising* (WTP) that was developed by a couple of researchers in Scotland, Dai Hounsell and Charles Anderson. Some people like ways of thinking and practicing better. I'll introduce them to the idea of *learning bottlenecks* that was developed at Indiana University by Joan Middendorf, Arlene Diaz, and

David Pace, and others. Sometimes they like that framework better. It's aligned with the principle that we know is important for learning.

Different people access knowledge-making practices in different ways. And we want to sort of lay out a smorgasbord, a limited smorgasbord, of options so that people can figure out what the best one is for them. So if threshold concepts is the one that works, great.

SW: Through all your leadership roles and experiences, including being an Associate Dean, the Director for the Center for Innovative Teaching, Research, and Learning, and a Writing Program Administrator, what have you discovered to be the most productive approach to facilitating workshops and generating conversations about writing across disciplines and contexts?

LAK: Starting at people's points of need. So yeah, people like to engage with things when they find it meaningful for them. And so I'm lucky to be at a place, UC Santa Barbara, where, we're a relatively recent minority-serving institution. Within the last six, seven years, our student population is really changing here in California. People are really very interested in how they can best work with the students in their classrooms. Well, that creates lots of questions and lots of willingness to engage with different kinds of ideas. For them and for me too. I mean, I have learned so much as I've worked with faculty from across the university. And when people recognize that writing doesn't need to be like writing a five-page paper, but writing can do lots of things for them, can be super important. So that's another really great way to engage.

We have a project. So we participated in an NSF grant that Minnesota, Michigan, and Duke had a few years ago called STEM Write, where they were working with faculty. They were working with faculty development people and faculty to develop short writing prompts around difficult concepts in biology.

And we've sort of taken that and run with it. Now we have a project called Write/Learn at UCSB that either engages faculty in creating short writing activities, focusing on hard disciplinary concepts, so back to the threshold concepts thing, or hard ways of writing. But they're very short. I mean, they can be long if faculty want them to be, but they tend to be very short. And then we use Eli Review as a platform to facilitate that.

So we talk about inclusive practice being about facilitating access and opportunity. Access means making the knowledge-making practices of your discipline explicit and providing opportunity to practice with them. Opportunity means creating ways for people to bring their identities, knowledges and experiences to your discipline in order to push on those knowledge-making practices so that they are representative of and include the ideas of others.

Access is a thing that's pretty accessible for faculty. Opportunity's a lot harder. It's much more complicated. That is at the core of everything we do. And so there's, when we think about access and opportunity, we then engage in thinking about four domains of knowledge-making.

Disciplinary knowledge, so what are the knowledge-making practices of your discipline?
Representational knowledge, what does it look like, when you show what writing looks like.
Empathetic knowledge, how can you form and confirm knowledge with others, mostly your students, and how can you even learn about their identities, experiences and knowledges? That's especially important if you're teaching a class of 400 students, how are you going to do that? But there are ways to do that. And then learning knowledge, what do we know about learning and learners that can help you do this?

So, yeah. Everything that we do operates through the idea of inclusive teaching and thinking about access and opportunity, and then those intersecting knowledge domains and how we can think about what those are and how teaching functions through them.

I have to say, so two things. One, I will tell you, I actually have page proofs on my computer of an article that will come out in *WAC Journal* that's about that knowledge-making models. So that'll be exciting. The only way that leadership works is when you do it with other people. And so I have learned, basically what I try to do is take the knowledge of our discipline, build on that knowledge from other places, listen really, really, really, really, really hard to people, try to work with them to put some language around the things that they do, use that language and that thinking to develop new things that can help them advance their goals and their ideas within the contexts of our institution and its goals and our students, et cetera, et cetera.

So leadership is, and I'm certainly not the first person to say this, but it really is this sort of dialogic and sort of multi-dialogic process of listening, trying to put some boundaries around, delivering it back, taking it back. Yeah. It's so not a solo activity. It's one that requires, at least for me, constant evaluation and sort of reflexive metacognitive practice.

SW: Since you work closely with assessment, can you suggest ways directors can assess their WAC programs or what questions might be significant in helping programs and directors better understand their impact across campus?

LAK: I think the kinds of questions people need to ask about WAC, one, need to be aligned with the disciplinary interests. It's probably easier to start with what not to do, which is something like a value-added model. If students take course X, does that improve their performance in course Y? Well, unless you can control, and I mean in the research sense, a whole lot of variables, like how has the writing handled in course X and course Y? How much of the grade does writing account? Are the values aligned? Is the grading consistent? I think that's not necessarily a successful model.

What we can do is understand writers' experiences and their writing knowledge as they move from course to course. That is an easier thing to follow. And then you can ask writers to submit artifacts that they think reflect different elements of their writing knowledge or the direct evidence for any kind of assessment.

So I think we need to think about what are we assessing, writing and or writers? What are the key attributes that we associate with growth and knowledge development? And then what kinds of artifacts can be associated with that?

Asking writers to be involved in that process is really important. So at UCSB, we're in the last year of a longitudinal assessment of general education that follows students through the GE program, a cohort of students every year. And it's been really interesting to see what happens through that. So we're following students, but we're looking at the program, artifacts that students submit. We're seeing why students are taking things in general education. We're seeing the kinds of things that they tend to say that they're asked to do in GE courses. What kinds of knowledge do students say they're being asked to produce? How is that aligned with the overall goals? So we're seeing some really interesting patterns.

And actually, interestingly, so we just did a workshop. We're in year four of the study, but we're only through year two of data analysis, because it takes a long time to analyze the data. And we just did a workshop. One of the things that emerged was classes where students write, that fulfill our writing requirement, students and faculty were consistently rating the artifacts more highly. And so that was a really interesting finding. And students were indicating that they had more opportunity to practice with the overall outcomes of the program in some ways, more than in some of the other GE areas. So that was a good point for us to say, "You know what? Here's a way, through Write/Learn at UCSB that other folks could even build writing into their courses." So maybe that's something to think about. Now, that's a really interesting illustration of doing a thing that was not associated with writing, but yielding a finding that we didn't know going into it, but it was like, "Hmm. This could be a thing that would be an action point based on this."

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