

Episode 7: Lisa King

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

Pedagogue is committed to facilitating conversations that move across institutions and positions. Each episode is with a different teacher or teachers about their approach to teaching, their teaching practices, values, assignments, assessments. The goal here is to provide space for and promote diverse voices at various institutions. You can always read more about pedagogue on the site, pedagoguepodcast.com. Again, that's pedagoguepodcast.com. You can also follow along on our blog and connect with us on Twitter or Instagram.

In this episode, Lisa King joins us. We talk about Native American and indigenous rhetorics. What this work means for the classroom, how it changes our approach to teaching writing and rhetoric, how to navigate conversations in the classroom on indigenous texts and artifacts. And Lisa shares additional resources for teachers and allies.

Lisa King is an associate professor of English at the University of Tennessee. Her research and teaching interests include cultural rhetorics with an emphasis in contemporary Native American and indigenous rhetorics, visual rhetorics and material rhetorics. More specifically, her focus rests on the rhetorics of cross cultural sites, such as indigenous museums and cultural centers and theorizing cross cultural pedagogy through the teaching of indigenous texts in rhetoric and composition classrooms. Her scholarship has appeared in journals such as *JAC*, *Pedagogy*, *College Literature*, *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, and *American Indian Quarterly*.

Lisa, thank you so much for joining us.

SW: Before we talk about the importance of listening and including conversations from Native American communities and tribes, their stories and texts, and before we talk about why we should be doing this work in the writing classroom, I was hoping we could start by framing cultural rhetoric pedagogy and Native American and indigenous rhetorics. That might give us a better understanding of what this work does and will allow us to better understand the purposes behind talking about survivance and sovereignty.

LK: Indigenous rhetorics as a field of study is broad, of course. It overlaps into indigenous studies and cultural studies. In a sense of what we're looking at and what we're thinking about and places that we're writing from is the orientation towards indigenous rhetorical traditions of these lands, the founding rhetorical tradition are indigenous traditions here that of course that means reorienting fundamentally the way we think about rhetoric as something that comes from the Greco-Roman tradition as it has been translated and enhanced and changed from the European tradition and imported here.

We have to rethink I think how we understand rhetoric as meaning-making with language of course, but indigenous rhetorics wants us to think about indigenous peoples here, the traditions that already existed past and present. Contemporary work just as much as historical work. The

ways in which indigenous peoples have developed their own practices. I think most of what we're most interested in is contemporary work, ways in which indigenous peoples have negotiated, especially with colonization, colonization in education. What that represents now in terms of erasure of indigenous peoples from the rhetorical tradition, from our campuses, from our understanding, from recognition at all in the United States.

Although when we talk about indigenous of course that goes worldwide broadly, but mostly the focus that most are working on happens within North America. So, it's past but it's also very much present. It's also imagining futures for us in terms of meaning making practices. And we talk about digital in terms of bits and bytes, but we can also talk about it in terms of fingers as Angela Haas talks about in her article, "Wampum as Hypertext," and I love teaching that article just for that reason, because people don't think of digital in the older meaning, which is to say your digits, your fingers. The things that we make are also significant and that is not just for indigenous rhetorics. I mean, that's for any crafting practice, any making practice anywhere.

So, I think those are the links that broaden indigenous rhetorics application when we start thinking in broader terms of cultural rhetorics, right? Of course, we work with language, we're working with English, we're working indigenous languages, we're working with cross cultural situations. We're working with the writing classroom. We're working with what goes on in indigenous communities. My own work focuses on self-representation in museum spaces. We're also thinking about visual representations in terms of art, in terms of performance, in terms of mascots, in terms of stereotyping, in terms of how people think about indigenous peoples. Where did those assumptions come from and what do we need to do to work through that, to change that? Or if that invisibility is a problem altogether—how do we help cultivate a narrative of presence and encourage people to take that up, rather than continuing to ignore indigenous peoples and there really significant contribution day to day and historically.

SW: Do you mind talking more about what this approach does to teaching or how it shapes our understanding of teaching writing? How do we incorporate this work in the classroom or how does this work transform the nature of our classrooms?

LK: I think this kind of work is intimately tied to decolonial practices. And I don't mean decolonial in terms of an academic buzzword. I mean it in terms of really thinking hard about the ways in which our classrooms, our institutions, or programs, are structured along old colonial lines that are so taken for granted they're invisible to us. About what it means to communicate well on paper in a particular language for this and that reason. What other possibilities are there? And I think the field is going into really interesting and exciting directions in terms of opening up what rhetoric means.

So, when we think about indigenous rhetorics in the classroom, it also means thinking really hard about decolonizing our classrooms in terms of what kind of work or kind of ideas are we promoting. I'm thinking perhaps about whose work matters and whose language matters and whose work is valuable and whose isn't, whether that's implicit or explicit. And so when we encourage people, and when I say we, I'm talking about the community of scholars who work in indigenous rhetorics, many of whom hail from ties to the relationships with indigenous communities and nations. What we're encouraging people to do is we think the structure of the

classroom and move towards something that... And again, when I say something, like this is work that's ongoing. It's almost something you feel in your bones and it's hard to articulate. It's a vision that hasn't quite materialized, but we're working on it. This is exactly the kind of work we need to do.

So, with the first collection of the American Indian caucus worked together on, and I was honored to be an editor for it, one of three co-editors, it was myself, Joyce Rain Anderson, and Rose Gubele. *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story*. And what we were trying to do there is to start providing some entryways into this. So if you're thinking about indigenous rhetorics in the classroom, what does that look like? Well, it means that if you're thinking about the rhetorical tradition, it's not just... Like there's the three key concepts that my students all know: logos, ethos, pathos. We all know those. What other orientations can we take to rhetorical practice? What if we start thinking of it in terms of indigenous terms or things that are fairly consistent across indigenous communities, something about relationship, reciprocity, responsibility. What does that look like?

What happens if we start teaching with those as well? What are the strategic alliances that can be made or strategic reorientation. Because if there's a critique of Greco-Roman practices as it's been translated into the present, it's agonistic, it's fighting, it's battle oriented, it is win-lose, and it's way too easy for that to turn into a zero sum game.

What I think many indigenous reorient us towards is community again, and that's not the only way and I don't think that should be like, "Whoa, we are going to be like Indians and we are going to do community practice." I don't want people to take it up like that, that's the easy appropriation, that's the I'm going to hack a little multicultural spot into my syllabus, I'm going to plug it in and call it good.

That's not what we're asking for. We're asking for a fundamental reorientation of that syllabus or that classroom practice. And if there are other links that can be made. So, what does it mean to be in community and for indigenous peoples or for specific tribal community? What does it mean then within your students own community, and this is actually the way I structure my own classes, is if I use indigenous rhetorics as an example, I can start with that. And then, I am inviting them to say what does your community do? Identify a community and work with that. And so, we start building a constellation of understanding together about what rhetorical practice in meaning making will look like and all of the complications and ways that people bump up against each other or clash. Right? And the way they contact and other places where colonial spaces, specifically where people knead, clash, and grapple. Sometimes literally, but sometimes rhetorically.

SW: We can incorporate Native American writers and voices in our writing classrooms and we can have conversations about community and sovereignty, but that doesn't necessarily mean we're committed and invested in these values and this work. You mentioned earlier how we shouldn't just include a text on our syllabus and call it good. So, I think we have to consider what we're asking students to do. And I don't mean what we're asking them to read. I'm talking about something beyond that. I'm thinking about how students also need to be thinking and analyzing what this means and why this matters, how this impacts us individually, but also communally.

How this makes us think about our own histories and what's happening in current communities or who's being affected by laws and policies, which means as teachers we have to provide opportunities for students to explore this in writing. Do you mind sharing an assignment or how students take up this work in your classroom?

LK: The first assignment is students have to choose a community that they belong to, right? So, I can model for them what that looks like, using indigenous sources, and then they choose their own communities. And I think that the fine line that you have to walk when you're working with controversial material, or material that the students are going to feel any kind of guilt over. Like I should've known this or, "What, are you calling me a colonizer?"

And in your head you might say, well, technically we can talk about that. But what I'm not after at the moment is trying to cut people down. What I'm trying to do is to get you to open up and think about what community means, what rhetorical practice means, and I want you to do it with your community, but also its connections to others in mind.

And so, while I'm modeling this using indigenous writers as much as I can, I'm asking students to do that kind of analytical work with their own communities. Right? So, I get stories about what it's like to be an immigrant, what it's like to be a woman in STEM, what it's like to be an artist, what it's like to belong to a sorority. And that was really interesting project. I've learned a lot about CrossFit and what that community looks like. They can select something that's significant to them. We can model that, so the first is a rhetorical values analysis and narrative analysis, where they have to choose one source that represents their community and work through how do rhetorical values in narrative framing operate, right? And how does your community tell a story and what kinds of appeals is it invoking?

And then, the second one is an autoethnographic project where they have to talk about how their community represents itself, how others have misrepresented it, but then also how your own community has also misrepresented others potentially. So, I refuse them the victim narrative. Now to different extents, right? I know that if a student is writing about being an immigrant or belonging to an immigrant community, that there are some very real threats these days. Not that there hasn't been in the past, but the threat has become all the sharper, right? So when they go to that last part to talk about misrepresentations that their community makes... I'm thinking of a particular student project where they were talking about how internally what they do to each other, right? So, he's able to talk about this sort of internal conflict within the community. And that was a really beautiful nuance and something that he had a space to write about that he hadn't had a chance to do before.

Others talk about being an immigrant or part of an immigrant family. They've talked about the racism that comes with that, but then also the temptation to paint everyone else outside the community in self-defense, right? And so, that's different than the kinds of narratives that feels like lower stakes. Where I'm like, well, I'm a fan of country music and sometimes people think I'm... But then again, there are still also legitimate class questions. And rural versus urban. There is a way I think to legitimize students' stories, but also to make sure that they're willing to complicate them and to tease that out.

*SW: Thank you, Lisa. This is my last question. I was hoping maybe you could talk more about being an ally. How can teachers become more familiar with Native American and indigenous rhetorics? I'm thinking about your edited collection, *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story*, because it helps frame some of these concepts and why they should be taught and also offers really practical strategies and resources for teachers. So, maybe you could talk about how that work came to be and then where teachers can go that can help with these practices.*

LK: When we first were designing the edited collection, *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story*, we were thinking about all of our allies, all of our educated friends who were saying "I really wish I could do this. I just don't know how to get that into my classroom. I'm afraid I'm going to make a mistake. I don't want to misrepresent, and so maybe it's better if I just go hands off all together. I'm just not going to do it. I'm just going to stick with what I'm comfortable with and I'll support you from afar and I'll come to your panels."

And that kind of moral support is great, but what we really need is for people to do that de-colonizing work in their classrooms. But here's the thing, I understand the fear. And as teachers, we all know that we make mistakes, we screw up, we slip up with the best of intentions.

It could be an exercise that worked really great with one class. You turn around and you take it to the next one and it bombs. Right? So, I say this with all empathy, I totally get it. At the same time, we need you. And so what we're advocating for, and what the edited collection was meant to do, was to be a sort of beginning point. It was meant to be a series of ideas for what could you do in your classroom. And I think many of those pieces talked about this. And I was thinking about key terms. So, I wrote one of the first chapters in the book to sort of introduce key terms, because people are like, "I don't have the background. I don't have the education." Okay, good. Well, let's start about sovereignty, self-representation. Let's talk about some of these basics, right? Good. You've got that. You've already got a good foundation to start with that.

And look where you are. You need to ground yourself in the place in history where you are in the land and who you are, because all of this is indigenous land, all of it. There is no place you can stand in North America that's not, right? So, recognizing that. Who are the indigenous communities who were and are here, right? And I guarantee you they're still there. No place has been completely erased. The University of Tennessee doesn't have an indigenous studies program, it's a crying shame and embarrassment. And if you ask about it, they'll say, "Well, we don't have any federally recognized tribes in the state of Tennessee." And then the counter question I have is why is that? Do you remember your history?

The also great thing is that the Eastern band of Cherokee Indians has also begun purchasing property in Tennessee. So now, there's a little foothold there. So, I feel like building justification that way too. Or at least I can build on Eastern bands reclamation of this homeland.

But I was going to say, you can self-educate. You can learn the history of the place. There are resources out there, there are land maps, talk to your university librarian, they're there to help you find that information, but self-educate about the indigenous peoples. Right? And so, I think really significant. Those are two really great starting points. From there, let's talk about national news. Let's talk about Standing Rock because Indians in the news, they're everywhere.

We have two tribal members in Congress right now that are doing really amazing work and are really pushing our elected representatives to do better, right? Or they're trying. So, we can talk about murdered and missing indigenous women. We can talk about Standing Rock. We've talked about the protests going on right now at Maunu Kea on the big Island in Hawaii. There is stuff going on all the time, but we've got to make that visible. So, I would say keep an eye out and keep working to do that, because you've got to put the effort in. And yeah, you might make some mistakes, but we're glad to provide you resources and we want to support you. So on that note, in terms of resources.

So of course, our edited collection. Of course, this is what we want to share with you. Let's see. Crystal EchoHawk and the Reclaiming Native Truth projects is a really great online resource. And so, if you just Google "Reclaiming Native Truth," you'll get to the websites and there's actually an entire publication, it's a PDF, that you can download for free, it's called *Changing the Narrative About Native Americans: A Guide For Allies*—and so, if you want something written by indigenous peoples from across the United States. If you say "Hey, we want to do some better work." Here's what we're asking you to do. We're asking you to challenge that narrative of invisibility because what their report found in the long years of research they did on where the major barriers to non-native peoples' understanding indigenous peoples on this land and understanding all those issues is invisibility. So, I think one of the major steps that has to happen. So, *Changing the Narrative About Native Americans: A Guide for Allies*, I think is really significant and a really useful resource for people who are willing to get more involved and to better educate themselves about what they can do and what's appropriate to do.

And I would also say come to our panels. Look up our research. The American Indian caucus at Cs is working on a bibliography that we can share more publicly. The wonderful thing is, especially compared to 15 years ago, there's so much more scholarship out there. We have people working on it, and it's a really beautiful thing. But I think we're finally to that point now where we have a critical mass of scholarship that we want to be able to make available. Or at least people have titles, books, ideas for where to put resources, or where to go. They're out there. We have them. So, that work is ongoing.