

Episode 75: Lori Shorr

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Lori Shorr about teaching and research on policy and practice, community-engaged pedagogies, service learning, educational policy, and the gap between K-12 and higher education.

Lori Shorr is currently an Associate Professor of Urban Education at Temple University where she teaches Urban Education Policy and School and Community Partnerships. Prior to this position she was the Chief Education Officer for the City of Philadelphia from 2008-2015. In that role she was responsible for advising the Mayor on local, state, and federal educational issues as well as creating and leading the city's policy positions on education at all levels. Prior to taking this position, Dr. Shorr was the Special Assistant to the Secretary of Education at the Pennsylvania Department of Education. In this capacity, Dr. Shorr was responsible for the Department's K – 16 initiatives including dual enrollment and transfer. She also lead Governor Rendell's Commission on College and Career Success and served on the Governor's Job Ready Budget Task Force. Previously, Dr. Shorr was the Director of School and Community Partnerships in the Provost's Office at Temple University.

Lori, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your teaching and research are centered on policy and practice, as well as community and social justice. Do you mind talking more about your approach to teaching?

LS: Sure. I think to do that, I have to give you a tiny bit of biography so that it makes sense. I got my PhD at Pitt and study with Dave Bartholomae and like, in fact, I was the cohort that, it was called "Visions and Re-visions" then, it turned into his major textbook. Right? So we sort of piloted that. I guess it's like 33 years ago. God, that makes me sound so old. But anyhow. I think I was highly influenced by Dave Bartholomae's idea and I think it spoke to me personally of the university is a thing you have to negotiate. And your writing is one way of negotiating that. Given that I was first-generation, college educated, that really resonated with me. At Pitt, my students, it really resonated with them. I mostly taught at universities with first gen.

I really liked that framing. I know there's some issues with it. And I also liked the idea of giving students more difficult texts to read, then maybe they're ready for. Because that's what I did in most of my life. I found myself always reading text that were more difficult than I was ready for. Now I have students read pieces of legislation for which they feel they have no capacity to do that. Right? I use some of that framing from Bartholomae. But I should say after getting my PhD in Critical and Cultural Studies at Pitt, I started at Temple University administration and did service learning, and community engagement, and just did a ton of that work for like seven years. Helped to oversee the running of six Philadelphia public schools, special assistant to the secretary of education in Harrisburg, and just did policy full-time and then worked at a nonprofit.

And then sort of my biggest policy role was as secretary of state education for the city of Philadelphia, that's like hand-to-hand combat policy right there. Because we were going through a crisis. We had to close schools. It was just the whole...everything...deep, bad, good thing. And then after that I was like, can I please come back to the Academy? So I went back at Temple. I've been back for four years now and I teach in the College of Education.

I should say the other person who has a lot of influence on me, which will seem weird is Gayatri Spivak who is a philosopher, activist, feminist. The idea that she has, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Can you hear voices that the institutions have set up to mute so that you can't hear them? For me, that has been a driving sort of a central thing that I think about when I think about preparing students to hear other voices, particularly around policy. Because there really is.

I did see a lot of what I studied with her in the work that I did in policy. That institutions are set up to hear certain voices and not others. And if you're involved in making policy, you have to learn to hear those voices in a way that can be impactful. So that's all to say that when I teach, those are sort of the things that I'm thinking about.

I focus a lot on having them read things that they wouldn't normally read like pieces of legislation. One of my favorite assignments is that they find a white paper. They write one paper about what, like just a basic, like here's what this white paper says. What is this non-profit or think-tank? Who's on the board? How's it funded? What other things have they written? Who do they cite?

Getting them to understand that every piece of writing is situated and that can have real life implications for many, many, many people when policy papers are situated in certain ways. In fact, one of the things that I have them read is an internal memo, which just saying that, I can just see people's eyes glaze over. Coming from my background, the internal memo was like the death of writing. I can't think of a more influential form of writing, honestly. I mean, writing to the editor is good, but the internal memo in a government is where policy gets brewed. So I have them read internal memos, good ones, but you have to be able to set the background, talk about options, talk about how those options have implications for some people and not others. Give recommendations, the pros and cons. I mean, it's a really...when I was a PhD student, I would've turned my nose up at this conversation so much. I can't tell you.

SW: I'm imagining a teacher listening to this conversation who might feel a little intimidated by this kind of approach to teaching. For example, centering policy in the writing classroom, bringing in legislation, white papers, internal memos. It almost seems like teaching a technical writing class. And then I'm also thinking about this from a student perspective. So you're talking about this approach and about teaching first-generation college students. I'm interested in hearing more about how you do this work or take this approach to teaching and create a space that's inviting and engaging for first gen students?

LS: I talk about how policy is made every day by everybody. So this idea that only codified policy is important, something that's passed by a legislative body, that's the only policy we care about, I have them read a piece of legislation because I want them to know that's just writing, it's just writing. Somebody wrote that. I actually have them read the definitions at the beginning of

every piece of legislation. If you just slow down and take a breath and read it, the definitions are some of the most important part of the legislation. So anyhow, this reminds me of Bartholomae. How do you tackle a difficult piece of writing? But then I also talk about, you make policy in your life every day, but it's like legislative and executive. You both make the policy of I'm going to exercise every day. And then you try to execute that policy. Doesn't always work.

But like schools make policy, teachers make policies, you make policies for your home. Policy is just rulemaking. It becomes more when it impacts lots of people. The more a policy impacts a lot of people, the more important it is. I get them to talk about what are the issues that they're most concerned about? And then I usually have to do at least one little session where I talk about the different levels of government and the different branches of government. It's not deep, but a lot of them really don't understand that. Then talk to them about, where does the thing you're interested in, who really holds the power over that piece of policy? So if you're interested...so charter schools are always something that comes up in what I'm teaching—that and funding are probably the policy in education that everybody needs to be paying attention to now.

So then we do a little research and figure out where is the leverage point for your policy there? And then what sort of writing happens? If it's in the executive branch, or it's in the legislative branch or it's, usually people don't pick the judicial branch because that just seems like a bridge too far. We sort of talk about writing is always situated. It always has some power element in it. There's always some people who are talking and some people who are listening. There's always some people who can't be heard. I really do talk about power and institutional power a lot when I talk about writing.

SW: You're teaching feels self-reflective and community driven. You actually built a service learning office at Temple University. I'm interested in how you went about building this office and what were some of the advantages of having a centralized space devoted to this kind of work?

LS: Yeah, so I can tell you a little bit about that. It started because I was teaching at the same time I was in administration and I was just having conversations with other faculty who were trying to negotiate. They wanted their classroom to be a place of, some wanted to be of activism; some wanted it to be a place of critical engagement in issues of power. At Temple, probably not anybody really realizes this, but Temple University in Philadelphia is like many universities situated in a vast piece of Philadelphia that's underserved, under resourced, lots of poverty. We started a service learning round table of faculty, and it sort of grew out of that. We started to get our service learning classes indicated in like the bulletins. So students would know it had a certain code. We did all these institutionalized things.

I have to tell you that whole office is gone.

When I came back to Temple, I had built a lot inside of Temple and I came back and most of it's gone. So that's not a sad story. It's just the reality of how institutions operate. Now I sit on the committee for gen ed that talks about how general education classes can be community-engaged. I think I have a different view. I think I was much more of a strategic service learning person 20 years ago. You need to have a longer mission and you need to plug students into this longer

mission. But I'm much more of not a strategic service learning person now. Now when I do work, I'm like, where are you embedded right now in your life? Where do you have a natural partnership? Let's talk about those. Paula [Mathieu] has it right. That's having the voice of the university be the dominant voice and not having the voice of the community being the dominant voice. I'm really in a very different place than I was when I started that service learning center.

SW: I was sitting here thinking about all the advantages of having an actual space on campus, like a writing center, but tailored toward community engaged pedagogies and practices. And the affordances of having something like that on campus and the possible resources that could come from that kind of space. I'm a lot more familiar with like an individual teacher embracing a community engaged approach and building partnerships within the community. I'm a lot less aware of colleges that have a centralized space or center where people can come and learn and do this kind of community engaged pedagogy and practice together.

LS: Absolutely. I mean, I think there's probably an in-between. Right? Between like a totally... one of the first things I did when I came to Temple as an administrator was to document everything Temple was doing in the community. And I put a database together and this database was interactive and you could go in and put like, I can volunteer Monday afternoons from two to, in this zip code and something would come up. I'm a very executive branch gal. I like to execute things. Right? So I was like, this is really going to help people do this work. And it just didn't work. That part didn't work. But the part that I think was worth saving out of that sort of very centralized model, because I was in the provost office doing this work, one of the things I think is worth saving is getting faculty together who are doing this work just to sort of support each other with like, this is how I'm handling this.

Everything from the very operational issues of insurance issues, which are always something that nobody wants to deal with. And it's the thing that shuts a lot of this work down. All the way to like, who are you reading? One of my favorite books on service learning is Novella Keith's *Engaging in Social Partnerships*, which is a really smart book about how this is embedded in larger issues. She did great case studies and does a lot around race and class that I think is important. Probably my two go-to books are Paula [Mathieu's] *Tactics of Hope* and Keith's *Engaging in Social Partnerships*. But I think just getting to know those books with a group of faculty would be great.

SW: As an educational policy expert, are there any specific policies that writing teachers should be paying more attention to right now in this very moment that could really affect the classroom, whether that be positive or negative, something that we should be focusing more time and energy on?

LS: The funding of public schools. I mean, I can't think of many writing classrooms that aren't impacted by the students who come into the classroom. Right? And if you teach, there are not many public schools that are not being impacted by the lack of funding in public education. If you live in a wealthy area, you have a good school in terms of it's well-funded. I think that issue is so key. So like in terms of an actual issue, I would say if you're interested in getting involved, it's an issue that undergraduates are really interested in. So if you were going to do a topics course in a general education, a gen writing class, looking at school funding and how school

segregation, desegregation, and school funding are like the different sides of the same coin, you can really get into important conversations about how public policies are part of power structures that have really instituted segregation in schools. And that those things weren't innocent and get them to look at what's happening now.

So one of the things I talk about in my class this term is the digital divide as the new redlining, right? So we talk about what's redlining. We do some work on digital divide. What are the policies that are happening right now that in 100 years or 50 years, people are going to look back and say, that was a policy that was meant to segregate people. The difference between the schools that I used to oversee here in Philadelphia, what they were able to do during the shutdown and what was able to happen in the suburban ring schools, it's a night and day difference. They like exacerbated the differences so immensely. So we read newspaper articles about what's happening because of COVID and online learning. And talk about that in relationship to redlining. So I guess I would say something like that is worth paying attention to.

SW: I always feel like higher ed should be paying more attention to what's happening in K-12 and should be listening and learning from K-12 teachers. At least from my observations, colleges often sit separated from the K-12 schools that surround them. There seems to be a gap. I kind of feel like colleges, not all, but certainly some are missing out on what could be good conversations and collaborations by not having a relationship with K-12 schools. Am I just assuming that this gap exists between K-12 and higher ed?

LS: There's definitely a gap there. And it has to do with social identity, honestly, of the people who teach in those places. You want a certain standing. It's important where you teach. That's a huge part of your social identity. The way that there is not a gap is that the policies that get instituted in K-12 will eventually work themselves up into university policy. You worried about faculty voice in governance in universities? You should be right now. Because what we saw in K-12, I'm hoping it's starting to unravel now, but like was very top down, teachers don't know what they're doing, centralize everything, push the curriculum down, do professional development with teachers where they just learn how to do this. And it's direct instruction.

You can see that just like standardized assessments, like these things roll over what we think is the vast separation between K-12 and higher ed. Those policies are piloted and gain cultural traction in K-12. And then they come to be just de rigueur when it happens at the university level. So it's important to look what's happening in K-12 policy because it's coming to a theater near you very soon.

One of the things that has been unique about my career is that I've been situated inside the university, in administration at the university, at the state level, in a nonprofit, in city government, and back again. I remember how I used to think when I was a PhD student and that was, the smartest people were in the university. I believe that that's why I wanted to be a professor because I wanted to be one of those very smartest people. Right? And I think that attitude is the attitude that is partially responsible for the big gaps and how hard it is to do partnerships when you're at a university. Being the smartest is a really bad way to be a partner. What I found by being in other places is there are really smart people working in government. There are really smart people working in nonprofits. They have a different lexicon and that you

can learn a ton from them. You can learn a ton from people who live in the community around Temple.

SW: You teach an undergraduate class called "Kids in Crisis: When Schools Don't Work." Can you talk more about this class and what kinds of conversations you generate and foster in that classroom?

LS: First, the title is not my doing, it's a very deficit-oriented title. I'm looking to change that, but it is a gen ed class. So there's 18 sections of this class. I oversee the 18 sections and I teach one every semester. It's also a race and diversity class. One of the great things about Temple is in order to graduate from Temple, you have to take a race and diversity class and every college offers several. So this is the College of Education's. And it takes on as... I guess, let me tell you this, the students keep a journal. And their reading journal and their final project are the two big assessment instruments if you want to call them that, for the whole class. The first five to six weeks are just reading, in the last two years have been on anti-Black racism.

So it's just teaching students some history that hasn't been taught in K-12. So we just do a ton of that. And their reading journals, which I read through and give comments on are just them saying I had no idea. And a lot of my Black students saying, I had no idea, but I knew something like this was up. I knew there was a game going on and that I was not able to win it, but I could not figure out why. So we do that. And then we look at schools through disciplinary lenses. And by this, I mean like actual discipline, like school discipline and school to prison pipeline. We look at segregation, desegregation. Then we look at dropout and push out. So that's what the class is about.

And we also look at it in two ways. We look at public policies and how those public policies help to institute anti-Black racism in the country. Then, we also look at our own racial identity development. I do that in every class that I teach. That is part of what we talk about. Because I feel very, very strongly. If you're very new in your racial identity development, you shouldn't be making policy. Because policies are always situated around who gets stuff and who doesn't get stuff. That's what policies are about all the time.

It's always about who deserves stuff and who doesn't deserve stuff. If you are somebody who's never thought about your race, or your class, or your gender in relationship to other people, you should never be making policy. Like in my graduate classes that I teach, we all do it. Of course we can't do it as in-depth, I mean, we only have 14 weeks, but it's part of every class I teach. If we're preparing students to be the next generation of leaders, then we have to let them know that this is important work. It's not soft and fuzzy work so that you can feel good about yourself. This is about cultural transformation.

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