

## Episode 85: Mara Lee Grayson

### Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Mara Lee Grayson about the purpose of first year writing, antiracist pedagogies and practices, facilitating classroom conversations on language and race, trigger warnings and trauma, and antiracist writing centers.

Mara Lee Grayson is an assistant professor of English at California State University, Dominguez Hills, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in composition and rhetoric and previously directed the university writing center. She is the author of *Teaching Racial Literacy: Reflective Practices for Critical Writing* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), *Race Talk in the Age of the Trigger Warning: Recognizing and Challenging Classroom Cultures of Silence* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), and articles in *WPA*, *English Education*, *Writing on the Edge*, and *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, among other publications. She is the recipient of the 2018 Mark Reynolds TETYC Best Article Award and a 2019 CCCC Emergent Researcher Grant. Grayson is also a Pushcart Prize-nominated poet. Website: [maragrayson.com](http://maragrayson.com). Twitter: [@maraleegrayson](https://twitter.com/maraleegrayson).

Mara Lee, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: You recently published an article in Writing on the Edge called, "To Teach or Not To Teach First Year Composition: That is the Profession." Can you talk more about this article, and your motivations behind it? Also, maybe you could talk about what you think the purpose of first year writing is and/or should be?*

*MLG: Yeah, this article was one of the pieces that I was convinced would never be published. It's part personal essay, part scholarship. I think it challenges the concept of disciplinarity in some ways that I imagine not all readers will get on board with. It's also a very personal piece for me. I took a really winding road to composition and rhetoric. Like a lot of people, I initially studied something else. I studied creative writing, began teaching during my MFA program, and did a PhD in English Education. I studied the things I wanted to study, the subjects that I thought would inform my teaching and my understanding of the discipline. And I want to point out, as I do in the article, that I had the privilege of doing so. That I had the privilege of studying the things I wanted to. Not least of all financially. I was incredibly fortunate also that my advisor was Sheridan Blau, whose work straddles the fields of comp/rhet, writing, and English Education. I felt that doing something interdisciplinary and working in multiple disciplines was not only acceptable, but an asset.*

And in terms of this piece, it's funny, I wrote a lot in it about narrative and fiction. But the past couple of years, I've actually turned back to poetry. So that gets me thinking that we're always in this process of making and remaking ourselves as writers and as teachers. And that's something I try to convey to my students, and to the teachers and tutors that I work with. As for first year composition, I confess to mixed feelings about the first-year comp requirement. Not because I don't think it's integral for students to learn, but because the very nature of the mandate

discourages students, and faculty, and administrators from valuing it, which is a shame since when done well, so many students seem to really connect with the work we do. Especially its real world applications.

And there are so many labor issues associated with the way first year writing programs are administered in the academy. Even though creative writing and English Education taught me things that I think composition and rhetoric alone could not, I also learned what I didn't know. I'm troubled by how our labor system leads to so many first-year composition courses being taught by folks who, perhaps despite good intentions, don't know our discipline or how it has harmed and continues to harm students, especially those who are already marginalized.

Ideally, first year composition, in my view, would introduce students to concepts of rhetoric and literacy that enable rhetorical flexibility and encourage agency. I think that part is especially important, so that they can make informed choices about their own writing. Ideally, it would be one part of an integrated vertical and lateral curriculum, and a broader culture of writing on a campus. Ideally, it would be a workshop, a place of play and experimentation. And in keeping with that model, ideally, it would be ungraded.

*SW: So, you're talking about some of your own pedagogical values, like ungrading, flexibility, workshopping, writing. Your teaching and research interest also center on antiracist and social justice pedagogies and practices. How do you challenge students to consider their cultural and social histories, and how do you go about facilitating conversations with students about language and race in the writing classroom?*

MLG: The first thing that comes to mind in terms of how we do this work is building trust. Building trust is paramount. If you know me, you know that I'm pretty outspoken and direct, which I think helps students feel a little more comfortable being open with me and open in the classroom. But it's gradual, and importantly so. I don't expect my students to trust me immediately, or to be willing to be vulnerable in front of classmates they don't know. Regardless of the space, building trust is about action.

We can't talk about hegemonic Whiteness, and then grade students according to their use of a standardized English, right? There would be no credibility. I make it clear through assignments, policies, and my assessment practices that my classroom is a space of challenging inequity. I explain why I do what I do in terms of both the broader work and the particulars. If I assign something, I explain why I'm assigning it. If I have a policy on my syllabus, I explain why it's a policy and I discuss it with students.

I think we shouldn't underestimate our students, especially this generation. They're already cognizant of racism and inequity. And what they may not see is how academic discourses in educational practices relate to and uphold racism and inequity. I think, also, in too many places we don't talk much about Whiteness. The direction of the discussion winds up, if inadvertently, placing the responsibility for inequity and then equitable change on those who are harmed by racism rather than on the systems, institutions, and individuals who perpetuate them.

I've worked with different populations, so I've tailored my approach a bit depending upon the student's identities and positionalities, and my identity and positionality in relation to them. When I taught in a private PWI, the work was in large part about engaging students in critical reflection about their own racial identities. And especially as a White ethnically Jewish woman, I try to model for students the type of self-reflection I'd like them to do.

I talk about my privilege, the conflicting parts of my identity, how I've come to my current understanding of my own situatedness in these conversations, and how we're all always shifting and learning. My students now are predominantly Black and Brown. Most have a lot of experiential knowledge of racism. But like I've seen with students of all races and identities, they don't always see how policies, practices, and discourses in the academy are part of a racist system that perpetuates their marginalization. And then, building trust is a little different...sometimes a little slower, because so many of my students experiences with White teachers haven't been positive.

I have to say honestly, I haven't had much trouble getting students to consider the social, cultural, and political contexts of language, writing, and communication. I don't think the credit for that goes to me. I think the credit for that goes to our students and where our students are now. It's much more often other faculty who aren't interested, particularly in the ways that their own classroom practices perpetuate racism. But I am continually impressed by my students, and their willingness to dive into conversations that too many teachers, scholars, administrators are still unwilling to have.

*SW: Mara Lee, I appreciate your reflection on your own Whiteness and identity, as well as how this work happens in different institutional contexts. You do some of this work in your book, too. Your book, Race Talk in the Age of the Trigger Warning: Recognizing and Challenging Classroom Cultures of Silence, talks about trigger warnings and trauma, and I was hoping that you could spend some time talking about how you use trigger warnings, what trigger warnings do to marginalized students, and how you navigate discussions on trauma in the composition classroom.*

MLG: Yeah, I should begin by noting that...and I think the whole conversation about trigger warnings, likely because a lot of it is happening outside of the academy and because the trigger warning wasn't actually created for the classroom room...the conversation is kind of confusing and convoluted at times. I think one of the best ways to sort of get into that conversation is just to consider the fact that some research, including actually some work I did with a Teacher Ed colleague, Adam Wolfsdorf, demonstrates that many people who claim to use trigger warnings also admit that they aren't sure what a trigger warning is.

It makes sense, again, given the fact that the trigger warnings weren't created for use in the classroom. And then most of the discourse around their use in the classroom comes from outside of the classroom. But that also means that the term itself is a problem. Then there's research that demonstrates that the likelihood of re-traumatization, which the trigger warning in some ways is meant to prevent, it's actually very low in terms of possible re-traumatization from classroom exposure to textual material.

There's been a bit of a conflation between being triggered, being re-traumatized, and then just being uncomfortable. The most interesting part, I think, is that the people most likely to feel discomfort in classroom settings are students who have not experienced trauma. On top of that, one of the studies I conducted a couple of years ago demonstrated that in composition classrooms, trigger warnings are likely as to be used by White instructors in predominantly White institutions. Yet interestingly, race and racism were topics commonly prefaced with a trigger warning. In those cases, who is the trigger warning for?

In some spaces, I think it functions as a sort of disclaimer for teachers who want to talk about racism but aren't sure how, or who may anticipate pushback for such conversations. In others, it seems to cater to White fragility by allowing White students to avoid the cognitive dissonance that comes from acknowledging the prevalence and impacts of racism and their own complicity in it. Finally, triggers to PTSD and other trauma-based disorders are unique and individualized. Even the term "disorder" emphasizes that PTSD is individual or a deviation from a norm. But if we consider the ongoing trauma of marginalization, those who are marginalized experience trauma every day, and certainly in the classroom.

But the trigger warning risks individualizing trauma by marking it as out of the ordinary, when trauma and racial trauma are actually very common. And of course, this is all complicated by the fact that racial trauma is largely unaccounted for in trauma scholarship. In short, I don't think the trigger warning is itself the problem. But it's sort of a band-aid solution to the inequities inherent to schooling. What I want us teachers, and especially those of us who are White, to reflect upon is that it's the normative ways of doing in the academy and in the classroom that are most detrimental and most traumatizing. Particularly, but not exclusively for students who are already minoritized and for students with histories of trauma, whether it's racial trauma or not.

As for me, I don't use what people would consider a trigger warning. But I do let students know at the beginning of the semester the types of material we'll be discussing. And we review what I call a respectful honesty policy. It's a short statement on my syllabus that essentially says we will respond to material and to each other in ways that are true to ourselves, but also respectful of others' experiences and humanity. We unpack the socially and culturally situated nature of terms like respect rather than relying on an assumed shared understanding, we share our own communicative preferences, and we come up with shared community guidelines of sorts. What we do when we're uncomfortable, for example.

I wrote about some of the ways teachers can tailor this to their own classrooms in my first book, *Teaching Racial Literacy: Reflective Practices for Critical Writing*. At the end of the day, I think some of it is a lot simpler than we make it out to be. It goes back to building trust. We have to build trust with students that we're there to work with them. That we're not only not trying to harm them, but also that we're actively working to whatever extent possible within the space of the classroom to mitigate the harms that may have already been done to them in education.

*SW: So, a brief follow up: What kinds of materials or assignments do you use or draw on to help you do this antiracist, social justice work? What texts help you facilitate conversations on language and literacies?*

MLG: In most of my classes, I start...and this is at any level from first year composition to my work with graduate students, I start with something like a language and literacy autobiography, but it will differ depending upon the class that it's in. In a first-year composition course, it might be a language and literacy autobiography. In a graduate course, I do more of a language or a rhetorical self-study. I really like when the gaze is turned on the self. I think that helps a lot of students make tangible some of the concepts that we talk about, and they start to notice how out their own uses of language, their own ways of communicating...even the ways that they write whether in the classroom, or via text message, via emails, communications to friends, is situated in a particular discourse community or in multiple discourse communities. And that those discourse communities are often not necessarily at odds with one another, but that there are tensions between them. Something that turns the gaze on the student themselves, I think, is really important. And it's a really important entry. I try to do that in a way, especially if there are students in an upper division class that is not the exact same type of language and literacy autobiography that they might have done before.

I've also done a racial autobiography. So, students are asked similarly in a language and literacy autobiography more to think about their earliest experiences either learning about racism, learning about racism from a more experiential or a more academic perspective. Then, I think there are a lot of considerations within an assignment like that, I talk about this a bit in my first book. That we don't want what one of my students called "a list of traumas," right? We don't want to put students in a position to feel that they have to pour that out on the page for our benefit. It's voyeuristic and it's harmful.

But if we invite students to take a certain angle on that, whether it's thinking about that experience and then writing about what that says about society, or if they are inclined to write something more personal, leaving that as an option as well. That's something I would probably add that all of my assignments have options. I don't think I've ever given an assignment that says, "This is the topic you have to do. This is the exact genre." There's always something in there that's flexible, and I try to work with students to tailor the assignment to them.

*SW: Mara Lee, you were the Director of the Writing Center at California State University, Dominguez Hills. I was wondering if you could reflect on your administrative philosophies and practices. What kind of policies or practices did you use that helped you embrace an antiracist, social justice-based orientation to writing center program administration?*

MLG: Our writing center is very new. It's actually just over two years old. When we started it, we intentionally grounded our work in equitable and antiracist policies, ideologies, and practices. Dr. Siskanna Naynaha, the Writing Across the Curriculum Coordinator at CSUDH, pulled together a pilot team of which I was a part, and we immediately began working with tutors on what our approach meant for our work together. For those who are interested, Siskanna and I have actually written an overview of our program, which is scheduled to appear in the Summer '21 special issue of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*.

And actually, this fall, our newest faculty member, Dr. Sherwin Sales, will be stepping into the director role. We're working together during the transition, and I think that speaks also to the need for collaboration in this work. Practically, we emphasize student and tutor agency. I've

always tried to be transparent in my approach to leadership. We encourage the use of multiple Englishes, and we explicitly challenge White language supremacy and singular notions of academic discourse through the materials we share and the ways we support students. We don't view writing in terms of "correctness and error." And we work with students to ensure that their approaches to students are focused on the students' agency, and the strengths and assets they bring to their writing.

Some of this, of course, it's really just good pedagogy. Isn't that what Gloria Ladson-Billings said about culturally relevant pedagogy? It's just good pedagogy. But we know when a teacher says that a student's writing doesn't sound college ready or graduate level, that that teacher has a particular picture of a student in mind. Considering the deficit model approaches to writing that prevail, we've had to do a lot of messaging work to explain the particulars of our approach and its significance. We've also offered workshops for faculty across the university. And because the writing center's new and because we've done so much public messaging around the work, I've gained some visibility on campus that I've since tried to use to challenge other policies and practices that work against our students.

I've worked with what was formerly the Student Conduct Office on less punitive approaches for dealing with what teachers might report as plagiarism. I've worked with the General Education Revision Assessment, and with our Strategic Planning Committee. And last year, I led a series of workshops on how Whiteness manifests in policy and pedagogy. But antiracist work can't happen in a vacuum or a silo. And honestly, it gets very lonely doing this work alone. That's why my colleagues in the field who also do this work are such an important source of support. What that really points out for me in terms of having an antiracist writing center is that it can't just be in the writing center, and it has to be action that extends beyond that space. And antiracism, it's always about action.

*SW: Thanks, Mara Lee. And thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.*