

Episode 73: Megan McIntyre

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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In this episode, I talk with Megan McIntyre about writing program administration (WPA), antiracist pedagogies and practices, supporting linguistically diverse students, digital rhetorics and activism, and making WPA labor more visible.

Megan McIntyre (she/her) is currently an Assistant Professor and the Writing Program Director at Sonoma State University in California. Sonoma State University is a Hispanic Serving Institution and part of the California State University system. Megan also chairs the General Education Committee at SSU and is in her third year as a CCCC Feminist Caucus Co-chair. Megan's research focuses on antiracist writing programs, postpedagogy, and social media. And you can find some of her recent work in *Composition Forum*, *Academic Labor*, *Present Tense*, and forthcoming in *WPA's* special issue on Black Lives Matter and anti-racist projects in writing program administration.

Megan, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I want to start by talking about antiracist writing programs and antiracist writing program initiatives. I know you are the Director of the Writing Program at Sonoma State University, so a lot of your time is addressing administrative issues and specifically equity issues and building curriculum and materials that support racially and linguistically diverse students. What institutional and/or programmatic barriers did you notice students were facing at Sonoma State University? And what kinds of antiracist measures are you taking as a writing program administrator?

MM: The first part of that question is easier to answer, which is when I got to Sonoma State, I walked into a campus that's part of the California State University System. So system-wide, there was a big conversation happening when I got here about graduation, time-to-graduation and equity gaps. When I walked in, I had the benefit of getting some really good data from our campus folks and system level folks that showed that there was a pretty significant GPA gap happening in our one semester first-year writing class.

So, we have a structure that is meant to support diverse learners. We have a one semester option, and then we have a stretch first-year comp option, which takes the same requirements, the same

word count, the same project requirements, the same learning outcomes and stretches them across two semesters. So that was built before I got here, five years before I got here with equity in mind. At the same time, though, we had this persistent equity gap in the one semester, and then over the last three years, we've opened up an equity gap, or last five years, an equity gap in the first semester of stretch.

So, we have two problems, right? One is a problem that is a known one, which is one semester courses with the sort of high number of words the students are asked to write in quick succession can be really problematic when there is a sole emphasis on “academic writing” with no attention to linguistic diversity. Then on the other hand, we had something we hoped would solve that problem, this two semester stretch option that was actually creating a different kind of barrier for students. I came in with some of this information, I got some more of that information and that was the first thing that happened.

The other thing that happened was last summer, and before the murder of George Floyd, other high-profile police murders of Black people that caused a reckoning on our campus, too, a long overdue reckoning on our campus. We are the least diverse CSU campus. For a long time, we were in terms of student population, the very Whitest and we were a destination campus for Southern California white students. And we weren't at all reflective of the diversity in our own community. Sonoma County is a majority Hispanic county, depending on how you count and who's doing the counting, but we're certainly a more diverse county than our institution.

All of that to say, there was information and then there was sort of a cultural reckoning around racism nationally that was also happening on our campus. So I started talking when I got here about the need to support linguistically-diverse students. We started talking about culturally sustaining pedagogy, we started talking about April Baker-Bell's work before she published her amazing book, *Linguistic Justice*, but her previous work which also focused on issues of linguistic justice, but we hadn't had a full-on conversation about it on our campus.

SW: As you were seeing these equity gaps as a WPA, what were you thinking in terms of action? Or in what ways did you take action to address these issues? Then maybe you could also talk about how you mentor first-year writing teachers on antiracist pedagogies and practices.

MM: Yes, this is an excellent question. So, what I did and what I would encourage if I had a chance other WPAs to think about are the places where you can have an immediate impact and the places where you can have a long-term impact. The immediate impact part was changing the way we did graduate teaching associate training. So we have a year-long GTA course plan where they take a pedagogy and theory course with me in the spring before they teach. I have optional workshops for thesis development and pedagogy development and writing assignment development over the course of the summer, and then they take a practicum with me their first semester teaching. All of that work was then infused with equity-based practices.

So in the theory class, we started by reading Iris Ruiz's work, her book, *Reclaiming Composition for Chicanos/as and Other Ethnic Minorities*, which sort of resets the history of composition. We started by talking about ethnic studies and the California State University System and how that should impact the way we think about how universities teach students to write or conduct writing classes. Then we moved on to the amazing work on culturally sustaining pedagogy, critical hip-hop pedagogy and other equity-based and asset-based pedagogies. A lot of that work coming out of K-12.

All of that was their theory and pedagogy class before they ever taught. Then, I did workshops over the summer, like I said that were optional, but were focused on how do you build a set of course policies that have equity in mind. Then the practicum class was largely about anti-racist and equity-based assessment. So we spend the first half or more of that practicum semester talking about all different kinds of grading. Grading contracts, ungrading, equity-based grading, contract grading, all the ways that you could think about grading differently than many of us or many of them have ever had. That's the first thing. I think a lot of us, if you have graduate students that teach in your program, as a WPA you often have total control or lots of say at least in what that training looks like. That's the first place I started and I would encourage other folks to do that.

The second thing I did was all of our professional development sessions were focused on equity, on asset-based approaches to teaching writing. We started doing a book group or article reading group of brown bag lunch approach, and so professional development was about that. Then we looked at our outcomes. The first thing I did was remove the sentence in our outcomes that was about standard academic English, so it no longer says that in our outcomes that we have to teach students standard academic English. It is still ongoing work, it's not like deleting that sentence means no one focuses on that in their class any longer, but removing the requirement is a big step, right? It takes the boundaries off of what faculty think they're allowed to do and opens up conversations about what we can do, and what it looks like to have an equity-based and asset-based writing program.

SW: You have a website full of wonderful resources that can help teachers embrace antiracist pedagogies and practices. It's meganmmcintyre.com. Again, that's meganmmcintyre.com. It includes documents on antiracist teaching resources and steps towards antiracist teaching. Would you like to talk a little bit more about that?

MM: Last June when a lot of us were sort of grappling with our own practice and thinking about how racism manifests in our own program, and I think that was a thing lots of us were thinking about. It was something that in the wake of George Floyd's murder was pressing on me as a teacher, maybe even more than a writing program director, but as a teacher, what am I doing that is furthering this problem? And what can I do that's different than that?

So, I wrote a letter to the faculty in our program and I said, "Look, this is really tough, but it's important, right? This is a moment, and I want us all to take this moment." So I laid out the seven

things that I was doing, and I then posted it to Twitter, as I do so many things, then to my website. But basically laying out here are seven things that I think are possible and practical to actually do in our classrooms right now.

In some of the stuff that I think lots of folks are talking about, creating a more diverse reading list. Something I emphasize there and elsewhere and also when I'm talking to the graduate students or talking to faculty in the program is that diversifying my reading list isn't just making sure that, for example, we have black authors talking about what it's like to be black, it's much, much more than that.

So it's also about when we define literacy, do we have an inclusive definition of literacy? So, do we teach James Baldwin's definitions of literacy alongside what are sort of more white stream definitions of what literacy looks like? I think those things, reassessing how we do assessment, but also things that I think are tough personally or awkward personally, but really easy to implement, like acknowledging that systemic racism is real, saying it out loud to our students, acknowledging that academic writing comes from a place of oppression.

I think Geneva Smitherman has written so extensively and beautifully and compellingly on this point, that our sense of what academic writing is, is actually based on ways of speaking, ways of knowing. The way it has become so powerful is that that whiteness has become invisible or she says it's become inaudible. So it's no longer marked by a racial correlation, but it is, it's correlated to whiteness. So, acknowledging that fact in our classrooms is also a big step to supporting our students that come from linguistically-diverse backgrounds.

Then I think the other thing is about being compassionate, empathetic, and caring in your pedagogy and your relationship with students. So, I talk about treating students as whole people and how that can translate into policies. I posted on Twitter a few weeks ago basically that my one weird trick for my life getting better is that I accept all late work and I grant all extensions. That seemed to resonate with folks, but I think that that's true. It's recognizing that people's lives are really complicated. Our first-year students come from a really wide range of backgrounds and circumstances, and so without requiring gutting self-exposure and disclosure, we can treat them as adults and whole humans who deserve care and a break.

SW: I know your research and teaching also focus on digital rhetorics and pedagogy, such as agency and activism through digital tools and networks and social media. What kinds of topics or themes do you explore with students?

MM: One of the things that I've done in both my first-year classes and in upper division undergrad classes is, I've used mostly Twitter because it's the place that I feel really comfortable. My dissertation, I wrote about Twitter, so it's been a sort of long-term love affair here. But asking students to write about communities as they exist online and thinking about how they participate in those. Hashtags are the one feature of Twitter that's sort of been consistent from the beginning of the platform, and it has been a way to find other folks on Twitter in the easiest way

possible to create communities on Twitter from the beginning of the site. So thinking about those as communities is I think really key to understanding why Twitter functions the way that it does. I wrote about this in my dissertation. But I think for good and for ill.

I teach an advanced composition class, which is open to all majors and I get a really wide variety of majors, because we have a senior level writing requirement that only about half the students at the university can actually fulfill in their major, the rest of them have to either take a timed test or go find another class that fulfills it, and my junior level class does. I'm usually working with one English major and fourteen to fifteen other folks, but the whole theme for that class is writing in community. So asking students to do explorations, asking students to recognize how visuals operate and asking them to think about how hashtags work. Then separately, how Facebook community groups work, because there is a different set of relationships there. That's a much more fixed relationship than I think hashtags allows.

My sense is that thinking about community as a theme in first-year writing offers students opportunities to talk about their home communities or to talk about their communities of choice in ways that lend themselves toward linguistically-diverse applications. I think Twitter is a place where, especially if you were there for the era of 140 characters, language changed, right? You had to change the way that you wrote. It wasn't just about brevity but the same writing style, it was literally changes to how we communicate. I think memes and GIFs exist outside of and predate Twitter, but there was a boom of those things in part because you didn't have the words anymore, so this sort of required a multimodal approach to communication.

A lot of our students, I think, regardless of the sort of digital native conversation which feels like a false binary, because there's all sorts of access and equity challenges and problems around imagining that entire generation of students comes in with a particular set of technical skills. But I think thinking about the linguistic skills they have and the linguistic practices that they're comfortable in, their sort of home places lends itself to also talking about places like Twitter that bring together visual, alternative linguistic. I have seen social media as a place for students to practice their own literacies that are important to them without me having to impose the practices of the academy on them. That has been a natural component of asking students to explore their communities as writers and themselves as writers, which are both really important parts of what I'm trying to do in first-year writing.

For me, first-year writing is not a class about teaching students writing skills, it's about getting students to practice and reflect on habits and approaches and strategies for communicating. We do things in lots of genres and we do things in lots of spaces so that students have ways of practicing the things that will help regardless of whether they ever choose to write in an academic setting again.

SW: So you've written about the invisible labor of writing program administration. In "Snapshots of #WPALife: Invisible Labor and Writing Program Administration," you explain how hashtags and Twitter provide opportunities to help make this administrative labor more

visible. Do you mind talking more about this work and how WPAs can make their labor more visible to their programs, colleagues, to the field, and to the public?

MM: There's this sense in early composition literature of being the lone compositionist, and I think in a lot of places, that's maybe not the model anymore. Having one rhet/comp person in the entire school is less frequent than it used to be, but there are lots of places where there is only one WPA. I am in a place where there's really, at this point now, there's a writing center director and she's wonderful and I adore her, but her background's not in writing studies, that's a different set of circumstances for her. She's also non-tenure track, so that makes it more complicated. It's more complicated for her, and it's more complicated for me to ask her to make herself visible when we're having discussions that implicate both the writing center and the writing program, because she's in a much more precarious position than I am.

I think a lot of WPAs are navigating challenges like that on their own campus. I think one of the things that I'm trying to do in that article is translate the work for folks outside of WPA-dom, right? Translate what it means when you get a simple "email" that asks you to translate something or re-approve something or re-certify something. Those are the examples I worked through in that piece. I try to lay out both the labor and the political set of decisions that you're trying to make on your own. What I try to do at the end of the piece is offer the community that has meant a lot to me, the #WPALife community, which I think...I tried to trace the history of it. I think it starts with Brad Dilger from Purdue using the hashtag to talk about his inbox and goes from there. But the visibility is a translation project, I think. It's recognizing that administrative tasks have rhetorical and political and scholarly dimensions.

The amount of research I do to present at a meeting about DSP, directed self-placement, is equal to the amount of research I do for a presentation at a national conference. The stakes honestly are a lot higher, because if I can't persuade the new administrator on my campus or the new liaison from the chancellor's office that directed self-placement is really important to our campus and to our system, that can have really big impacts on equity in the first-year program and do real harm to students, right? So the stakes are sometimes, for these seemingly innocuous administrative tasks, the stakes can be really high.

I think for myself, it was at the same time recognizing how the WPA Listserv has imploded multiple times and is not a space, frankly, I think that a lot of, especially tenure track or newer PhD'd WPAs feel comfortable in. I don't feel comfortable there. I don't think it's a space for me. It feels much more like a space for nostalgia for folks that are from a generation of PhDs that predate mine, and honestly often is taken over still by the voices of older White dudes and not at all reflective of what WPA jobs look like on a lot of campuses. Certainly not what I hope WPA jobs will start to look like or continue to look like on a lot of campuses.

So having a more open space, a space paradoxically that is much more public, but feels more supportive and intimate than that listserv space did was really important to me. Both just I need

other people, we all need other people, I think. Doing our work alone is not my bag and really lonely for me and really unproductive for me. But also we need audiences, right?

The best person to tell me if I am making a persuasive enough argument about something as important as DSP is another WPA, because they may have made the same argument, and they know what worked on their campus. Even if it's totally a different context, that's at least some data, some information about how to make it work on mine.

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