

Episode 124: Michelle McMullin

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Michelle McMullin talks about teaching technical communication at NC State University, research methods, the Corpus & Repository of Writing (CROW), and sustainable and ethical graduate student mentorship practices in the 21st century.

Michelle McMullin is an assistant professor at North Carolina State University. She teaches in the masters of technical communication program and directs the internship program in the English department as a member of the CROW research project. In her wider research, she studies collaboration, infrastructure, and the ways groups work together to mentor do project management and respond to problems. She's also a video game, board game, and RPG geek, fascinated by the ways these communities communicate and create together.

Michelle, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You teach technical communication at NC State University. Can you talk more about your students, what you teach, and your approach to teaching?

MM: Sure. I mostly teach in our master's in technical and communication program. Once in a while I get undergrads, but for the most part, I'm teaching master students. And a lot of my students are current professionals and already working in the field in a lot of ways. One of the hallmarks of my pedagogy is really trying to understand what my students bring to the classroom. To me, pedagogy is participatory at its best. The first class I get to teach is our intro to technical communication theory and research methods, which is a lot to do in 17 weeks. How I approach that teaching is to help students understand the kinds of questions and the ways that theory can inform their expertise and give them language to talk about what they know in their professional settings, where they work.

Most of my students don't necessarily think of themselves as researchers coming into the program, so it's really important to me to think about how to help them understand theory and research methods as practice rather than just classroom knowledge so that they can start to make those connections. The best way I know to do that is to get them reading the kinds of work that we do in the field. I think it's really important as practitioners for all of us, but particularly for them as practitioners to understand that their questions or the kinds of questions that they ask have to inform their methods, not the other way around. It's very easy for us as researchers and particularly for students as they start to sort of make sense of ideas for the first time to get that, to fall in love with a method or an approach, and look for questions that that method can answer instead of starting with their questions and understanding that they can find methods and learn methods that will support and answer their questions, if that makes sense.

SW: Michelle, is there literature in technical communication that has been really helpful in helping your students engage in research methods and develop language that encourages them

to ask these research questions? You said many of your students are current professionals working in the field.

MM: What I do in that theory and intro class is we start with sort of a field survey where they look at journals in the field and sort of skim and surface read broadly across two or three journals to see the kinds of questions and the kinds of ways that we approach technical communication in the field. And that usually helps me understand where their interests are, the articles that they track to and go, “This is the thing.” One class will get really interested in user experience, and one class might get really interested in project management. I can kind of surface their interests and questions and then use those articles—always a variety—and I try to really use what people are writing now as much as possible.

I choose things that I want to read and that I think are new and interesting in the field. I look for articles that pay attention, where authors and journals have made time and space to talk in real ways about methods. We don’t always do that. Sometimes we sort of skim over how we got to our results and our conclusions, but anytime I can I help students sort of take apart a particular article. One I can think of recently that I have used is Erin Brock Carlson published in TCQ. I think about how she used photo voice to do participatory methods while working with a group, and her questions are interesting. The way that she worked with PR practitioners was really interesting, but she was also very clear about her methods, which helps me teach students how to think about those things.

Rather than saying, “Here is a method and this is how you do it,” I think it’s really important for them to be able to pick out what they see as the methods in an article; that helps us develop language. If they don’t know how to talk about coding—it’s a term that usually comes to mean something else to them, right? It means programming. It means computer programming—help them understand what it means to code data. Qualitative coding took some explanation, but as those light bulbs turn on, they start to see, “Oh, this is how we can understand this kind of problem and how we can ask these kinds of questions.” I really let their interests and what literature we can find to unpack those interests and unpack how that work happens as a starting point.

At the end of that class, our final assignment is they have an opportunity to write a proposal because they’re master students who have capstones at the end of their arc up to your arc with us. I want them to start thinking about what research planning looks like or what design planning looks like because students struggle with scope, and what they can do in a time period. We start with they can write a research proposal, they can write a literature review, or they can write a design proposal, and that’s the culminating assignment of that theory and research methods class.

SW: Let’s transition to your own research. You’ve been working on a large collaborative project for the last seven years called CROW. Do you mind talking more about this and what you’re researching?

MM: This is my favorite thing to talk about; I could talk about it forever. The project is called CROW, which is the Corpus & Repository of Student Writing. You can find it at writecrow.org, really simple website. If you are interested or want to learn more about it at its basis, CROW is a

platform. It is a corpus of student writing. We have 10,000 or 11,000 texts, and like 10 million words that are mostly first year writing student texts that we have collected and stripped the identification information out of so that they can be used to study how student writing works. We have linked a bunch of those assignments with the repository materials that were used to produce them, so the assignment sheets, the PowerPoints, the tools that teachers used to help students produce those writing assignments. What we wanted to create was this tool for research and teaching.

And that started as a very small project with seven people at Purdue, from a variety of disciplines, applied linguistics, corporate second language studies, rhet/comp, and tech comm because to make all of those things, you have to support a team that can do it seven years in. We have a working platform that lots of people are using for research and teaching, and we have a team of some, sometimes as many as 30 and sometimes as few as 17 at six universities, including several that are international. We have partners in China and Poland. My job in all of that is to think about how we build infrastructure, manage a team, and mentor undergraduate and graduate researchers so that we not only support the tool that we've developed, but we do it in a way that is ethical and inclusive and builds those researchers that are participating in our team.

We really have taken reciprocity and inclusivity and ethical work, ethical labor practices as the thing that grounds us. My part of that project is we have developed a sort of heuristic for project management and team building that we call constructive distributed work. What it is, is a framework for how we keep all those things that are important: the infrastructure that supports our work, the forward progress and development of our platform, the professionalization and development and support of our researchers at all levels. How do we keep all those things working and how do we make sure that they stay open for negotiation and discussion? Really what we're thinking about is how we build a collaborative team and continue to support it, projects like this Corpus project specifically. But research in general at universities often get stuck at some point, right?

You make a website, or you make a thing. While you have graduate students that support it, while you have funding that supports it, it stays functional. But Corpus projects often end up as dead corpora where they're no longer growing and being added to and being adaptive because there's no tools to support them any longer, and there's no faculty to support them; people move on. We really wanted to be able to develop a system and develop an approach that would be flexible and resilient and be able to continue to grow.

SW: I'm interested in hearing who the intended audience is for CROW. Do you envision first-year writing instructors or program administrators or first-year students using this database across institutional contexts?

MM: CROW gets used by first-year writing instructors that are teaching a variety of first-year writing courses, because there's a lot of tools and some things to help understand corpus-informed pedagogy at write.org. The goal of corpus-informed pedagogy is that it helps us use authentic student writing and language to drive our understanding and to drive students' understanding of learning how to write. It's a more inclusive approach and a less prescriptive approach to thinking about writing, grammar, language, argument, all those things. Writing

researchers can use the corpus to do that kind of research. Our own career researchers and researchers outside of our team have used the corpus for their own questions about writing, about second language writing, about applied linguistics.

We also have teachers that use the corpus to teach writing in their classroom and students can use it to look for examples. There are levels of access to what's in the corpus so that students can look at the word "love." How do writers use these kinds of arguments or how do they use this word to trigger or demonstrate arguments in their writing? What does an argumentative assignment look like, or what does a literacy narrative look like? They can see those examples in context. There's lots of different ways to use the corpus. What has become as important to our team and to me and my research as part of this team is how we work is as important as the thing we have made. Teaching what parallel and networked mentoring looks like, teaching grant writing, teaching how to do project and team management in ways that are constructive and inclusive and consider labor and the needs of students. That undoes some of those hierarchical natures of a lot of labs, especially in science and social sciences. You do the work that your PI does, and that's the end; you just do what you've been told. We're really focused on a model that is informed by the questions and interests and needs of the researchers that are working on the team at all levels.

SW: One thread I'm hearing is this commitment to professionalization and mentorship in your teaching and research, and it being done sustainably and ethically. In what ways do you feel like graduate programs might consider or reconsider more sustainable and ethical practices of mentorship, graduate student preparation, and professionalization in the 21st century?

MM: This is a really big question here. Here are the things that I've been thinking about as I've been sort of mulling over this question. The things that I think are most important to us as we think about graduate education right now or at least how I approach it is to start with thinking about reciprocity in the ways that participatory design have taught us to think about reciprocity, right? What are our grad students getting in our programs and how are we supporting them to get what they need? Are we listening? One of the first things I tell my graduate students in that first class when I get them is that one of my goals is to teach you to ask for what you need and to expect that there are ways to get it. That's true in your professional life; it's also true in your graduate education.

I think we as administrators and educators have to be prepared to answer hard questions. Are we supporting our graduate students so that they can pay their rent and feed themselves and take care of their bodies? Are we creating, are we listening to what their needs are? Coming from a PhD program, in my own education at Purdue to a master's in technical communication program where the emphasis is on professionalization, or on industry professionalization for the most part. I had to think about who my students are and what their needs are and what kinds of questions are important for them to answer for themselves. I don't know that I have big programmatic policies to discuss, but I think we have to think about first and foremost: our students bring funding. They give us an opportunity to do the work that we do. What are we giving back to them besides a piece of paper with a degree on it is really the most important sort of question that I ask myself as I design curriculum and as I work with students to build programs.

SW: Last question, and this is a follow up. I'm curious since you're asking students to share what they need and to ask questions, has there been a theme or a throughline in your local context, something that you're hearing graduate students articulate and describe as a need that really stands out to you?

MM: They need better funding. They need paid internship opportunities. They need coaching on how to take the classroom work that they're doing and use those opportunities to build portfolio pieces. Those are important. Those are tools that they ask for, right? I need a good resume. I need pieces in my portfolio. I need an internship that will help me get the job I want in the field I want to work in. A common question for my graduate students in technical communication is how do I explain to other people what it is I do? What has become the most important way for me to answer that question is to help them be able to describe what it is they do, what their expertise is because many of them already have experience. Many of them have more industry experience than I do, or that their other faculty does. How do I help them articulate that expertise so that they are flexible, so that they can see themselves in a variety of environments, so that they understand how their skills as a technical communicator translate to project management, to user experience design, to writing, to editing, to lots of different contexts, right?

We know because we're rational that technical communication is a broad term that covers a bunch of kinds of work. That is not always something that students know but it's something that they want, right? They want to be able to see themselves as professionals and see directions for them to go. The more ways I can give them to open up those pathways for themselves, by explaining their own expertise, by developing portfolio pieces that show off what they know and what they do, by understanding their own professional development as project management, as something they have to work on and maintain and think about, that has been valuable to my students. I don't always have control—we don't always as faculty—but we can advocate and agitate and support. We don't always have tons of control over what our graduate students get paid. I have control over the ways that I contribute and how I see the work that I do building and really listening to students' needs.

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