

Episode 35: Neal Lerner

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

So, if you've been listening to Pedagogue for a while now, you know that this podcast is for and about teachers. We talk about composition, pedagogies, theories, practices, we chat about assignments and assessments. I think I said this a while ago, but this podcast is like a huge table. Teachers from everywhere sit down and talk about their experiences teaching. They talk about their institutions, programs, students, and they talk about their writing and research. There are times when episodes are focused just on the classroom. Other times when it's about institutions like two year colleges, and then some episodes are focused on program administration. You can read all about the podcast on our site, pedagoguepodcast.com. All our episodes and transcripts are there. Be sure to check out the contributors page to read more about the wonderful teacher scholars who have been on the podcast.

In this episode, I talk with Neal Lerner about writing centers, writing center research and scholarship, training peer consultants, and constraints that affect writing center work.

Neal Lerner is a professor and chair of the English Department at Northeastern University teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in writing and the teaching of writing. Lerner is the author of over 40 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters on the history, theory and practice of learning and teaching writing, and he is a five-time recipient of the International Writing Center's Association Outstanding Scholarship Award. His book, *The Idea of a Writing Laboratory*, won the 2011 NCTE David H. Russell Award for distinguished research in the teaching of English. His latest book, *Reformers, Teachers, Writers, Curricular and Pedagogical Inquiries*, takes up the distinction between curriculum and pedagogy in writing studies and argues that the field needs to embrace co-constructing curriculum with our students.

Neal, thanks so much for joining us. You're the Chair of the English Department at Northeastern University, but you were hired to direct the writing center there, and you spent three years directing the writing center, but before that, you spent five years building and directing the writing center at a previous institution. You came into writing center studies through education, so not rhetoric and composition. I'm really interested then in hearing about how you got introduced to writing center studies.

NL: You said, just to give a brief version of the story, right? I didn't go to grad school and education thinking I would study writing centers. I wasn't actually sure. I was mostly interested in what happens in community college writing classrooms, particularly basic writing classrooms, because that's what I had taught up to that point. After my first year in grad school, I was a TA for a Foundations of Education course that had a writing component, but I was supervising undergraduates who were doing their high school practica, which was a very weird experience. And after my first year, I got funding. I got a scholarship that I didn't even know existed. I think my advisor had put me up for it, and I'm not even sure. It was one of those I didn't apply, so then I got a letter saying, "You've been awarded a scholarship. It'll pay for your tuition for a year."

And so because of that, I didn't have to do the Foundations of Education course as a TA, but I still needed work. I was teaching as an adjunct all over the place for the income, but I still needed more work than that. So I applied for a tutoring job at the university's writing center, one of the university's writing centers, and I had done writing center work when I got my master's degree, so I was familiar with it. I liked it. Pretty early on that second year in my program, I realized that doing a dissertation on the writing center itself really brought together my interests in research, my interests in social construction of knowledge, my interests in the teaching of writing. And so that's what I pursued. I can't say it was my goal at the time to "When I graduate, I want to direct a writing center."

I'm never that quite goal-directed, but when I finished and I had written a dissertation about writing centers, up popped a job that was local, and because of my wife's career, I couldn't move and it was to direct a writing center at a College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, a brand new writing center. It was to create one from scratch. And I thought, "Well, that's fun." And since I had had so much writing center experience up to that point, that gave me, I think, an advantage in the hiring process. So they hired me to do that. So that was my first job as a director of a writing center. Pretty much everything else flowed from there.

SW: Neal, I'm curious as to what or who influenced your vision and perspective on writing centers given your background in education. Was it conversations with other writing center directors? Was it your own experience working in the writing center? Was it scholarship in writing center studies?

NL: So, all of the above. I think in my career in writing center work, it was definitely at regional and national conferences and making connections with other writing center directors that made me most excited about the work and gave me ideas for things to do. I often think back in my very first conference presentation at the Northeast Writing Center Association Conference, I was on a panel with Beth Bouquet, and I think that might've been the first time we met, over 25 years ago now, or just about... Yeah, no, over 25 years ago now. She had just finished writing a dissertation about writing centers. I was embarking on one, and we started what has been a lifelong friendship and mutual support in lots of ways. So being involved in the work and meeting like-minded folks was really important because it really became my niche in academia and higher education. I was the only one studying writing in my grad program, much less writing centers, and finding like-minded folks at conferences and both regional and national stuff was really important for a sense of belonging to some larger field.

Early on because of those kinds of influences, I was really excited by the ideas of writing center research and the writing center as a research site. Probably have written about that more than anything else. So seeing what other folks have done in terms of really, empirical research in writing center work has been influential for me. And then trying to do similar kinds of things. In a larger, theoretical way, I think the writing center is a wonderful enactment of social theories of writing and of an inclusive pedagogy that the rest of our institutions should be envious of.

SW: You've contributed so much to writing center studies, and obviously you have seen writing center scholarship grow tremendously since you were in grad school. I imagine, for the most part, this has been pretty exciting to see the development of writing center studies and

scholarship, but I also imagine throughout the years, you've seen reoccurring trends and threads in research that writing centers face maybe at an institutional level, and that has caused some sense of frustration.

NL: My frustration, and I'm not the only one to write about that, writing centers are in a funny place in terms of a constant need to justify their existence. A perpetual funding and staffing crisis, partially because of their alignment either with student services or student affairs or academic success centers. So there's this limit for many of them on what they could potentially be and do that there's ways in which the role of writing center director is hamstrung by institutional realities. So a writing center is a true research site where writing centers themselves as a disciplinary enterprise is never quite realized in ways that I wish it could. And that's not any individual's fault necessarily, but it's just a structural thing that just seems to be perpetuated. If you go back and you read stuff from the late 80s, early 90s, there's lots of same themes.

The stuff that, even a little bit later, the things that Nancy Grimm wrote about in the late 90s, and her taking the field to task in lots of ways for certain kinds of practices and attitudes and beliefs, it's still true. And I mean, Frankie Condon will talk about that too. So, you'll have plenty of people to say the field hasn't moved quite far enough for a whole variety of reasons. It's grown, but at the same time, it maybe hasn't grown as much as I think some of us would like. I've been frustrated in my own institution about grad students who haven't been as interested in studying the writing center as I would've been or as I was, and that's for a whole variety of reasons. So seeing writing center work as a career isn't as proliferated as I would like. I think I'm a bit frustrated by that. At the same time, I've had many, many people work with me as grad students or in other roles who've gone on to direct writing centers. So that happens and that's a wonderful thing, but still generally an institution, it maybe has one writing center and then one writing center director, and that's the norm. One of the most fun pieces I've ever written was about, I drew on some studies from the 1930s or accounts of writing center directors in the 1930s, and so many of the similar themes were going on then is now. So, it seems endemic to institutions of higher education to have these limits on what the possibilities are.

SW: So, you were hired nine years ago to be the writing center director at Northeastern University. I'm interested in hearing more about your vision for the writing center whenever you were hired. So whenever you got there, what did you have in store? What did you have in mind going into that position? What were you thinking the writing center could do and be?

NL: When I was initially hired at Northeastern, I was hired as a writing center director and faculty member, tenure-stream faculty member. And as a matter of fact, I was the first tenure-stream faculty writing center director. Up to that point, the writing center director had been non-tenure track. So I think the thing that I brought to it that was a variation... A bunch of goals. One was just to create a robust writing center to support as many of the community members' writing endeavors as possible. So in some ways, that meant opening a location in our library, which was a central location. It meant the mantra that I think about a lot that I realized at that moment, and it's not my first time as a writing center director, but it seemed particular to the institution, was to go to where writers are rather than sit around and wait for them to come to us. So we opened a location in the library, which we continue to have, just to reach as many folks as possible. So that was one goal.

The second goal was to work as much as possible to make the writing center a research site. And that largely meant for the staff, and the staff at the time was largely PhD students in the English department. That's actually shifted a lot since then, but they weren't even necessarily focusing on writing studies, actually, only a few of them were, but I wanted to give them opportunity to pursue research of various sorts. So that was another goal, and we were able to do some of that. And the third goal, I think is one that's common in lots of writing centers is what does it mean to be a writing hub for campus, for the university? So that meant lots of outreach. It meant partnerships with other entities. We sponsored faculty writing groups and facilitated faculty writing groups. We have done a bunch of things over the years, both when I was directing and when I was not directing to sponsor student and faculty writing in one way or another. So those are the three, grow it, go to where writers are and make it a research site.

SW: In A Guide to Composition Pedagogy, your chapter, "Writing Center Pedagogy," talks about how writing centers are social spaces and how centers inherently invite conversations on writing as a process and are inherently collaborative. What are some of the constraints that affect social interactions in writing centers?

NL: The thing I often think about is the role of interactants who aren't there, namely the classroom instructor as well as a whole bunch of other people who aren't there who have an effect on the social scene for student writing, whether it's their previous teachers, whether it's their perceived audience. How many things that students are writing in academia have actual audiences? Not very many. There are these hypothetical audiences. So they're trying to create and make up and imagine these audiences that they might not have a cultural connection to. So that's some of the constraints are cultural, social, ideological, particularly around multilingual writers and the ways in which consultants have to play these multiple roles or have this insider knowledge that they don't often have.

There's ways I feel like I want to investigate more that I've spent 25 years thinking about the role of the instructor as a proxy within the session. The instructor is the third person in that making up that triad in a writing center session, but the instructor's not there. The instructor might be there because of his or her comments on a draft or because of the assignment itself, but the person's generally not there. So what is that? What kind of conversation is that when it's being driven by someone who's not there?

Outside of writing centers, we have those kind of conversations sometimes, right? You're talking to your sibling about something your parents said and trying to figure something out. But it seems so inexact and imprecise and constraining in a way, that I think is worth understanding much more thoroughly than we understand it now. For me, the constraint of social actors who aren't present is maybe the most important one.

SW: Do you mind talking about the ways you develop peer consultants or tutors and what it looks like to prepare and train consultants to give feedback to student writing?

NL: Yeah, that's a great question. The kinds of things that we emphasized last year in the training, and I had an assistant director, a PhD student, and we designed the training together and did the training together. So what that training consists of, it just looks different in so many

different places. And actually next fall I'm going to be teaching the class for training students to be writing center tutors. I've taught it a couple of times before, but it's been a while. I'm looking forward to that. So in some ways there's a basic pedagogical function of it, which is how do you give people feedback on their writing to help them improve? What are the best practices around that? And no surprise, right? It all has to be very hands-on.

So, there's a lot of practice to it. I think the thing that I extend from any of my teaching is the ways in which these practices need to come out of what people want and where they're coming from and what their attitudes are. So trying to explore what their experiences have been, what their attitudes are, what their beliefs are, because the way we practice teaching and tutoring is so shaped by beliefs that often we don't even realize, the implicit biases and sometimes simply fears, right? So I'll give you an example of that. One of the things I instituted more than it had been done up to that point, was online consultation, and we do it synchronously. When I started at Northeastern, there was email consultation. Nobody was ever very happy about it, and it was pretty low volume. There was essentially one person assigned to deal with it.

So we eventually got rid of that, and we went to synchronous online using the WC online platform. And there's so many ways in which consultants, a lot of consultants really were uneasy with it because it was so different, and the norms are so different than face-to-face consulting. Part of the issue around helping them be successful in that endeavor was facing those fears. What were they afraid of? And could we practice in ways? Were their goals for the sessions not quite aligned with what the students' goals were and what the medium might afford? So we just spent a lot of time talking about those issues and practicing those issues. Training is always lots of scenarios and reflecting on problem solving in a way with different scenarios. We often have done a lot of that. It often involves reading and response to that reading pretty much every week. Last year, we would have monthly staff meetings that were training sessions. We often had guest speakers with expertise. There's no way we can be experts of everything. Particularly 35% of the students who came in were multilingual writers. So we're always searching for expertise on helping us work most effectively with multilingual writers or with grad students or with disciplinary writers. And so bringing in others to help gives us the benefit of their expertise and also pushes the writing center out into the consciousness of these other folks, knowing that this is a place on campus that's doing a particular kind of work that's important and valuable. I think in general terms, that covers it. I was lucky to have co-written textbook with Paula Gillespie on training writing tutors. So I would often draw from that just because I had access.

SW: So, I can only speak from my own experiences. I worked at two different writing centers, and I feel like those experiences, working with students, listening to them, hearing their goals, supporting their agency as writers, responding to them, and then also building a community with other consultants and going through scenarios and workshops and attending writing center conferences really informed my teaching and what I value and do in the writing classroom now. How does your writing center work and background inform your teaching?

NL: Yeah, so I had the same experience. I was a writing center tutor while I was getting my master's degree before I became a classroom teacher. And if anything, that experience propelled me on to a career as a writing teacher. So I think sometimes it feels elusive, but I think my goal always in responding to student writing has been to duplicate what I feel works In the writing

center. It's very different as a classroom teacher. Authority is completely different. You're giving grades. So there's many ways in which it's never like writing center work where you're much more in a mutual relationship rather than an authoritative relationship. But certainly in terms of how might I respond to students, and I mean literally that sometimes has meant over the years, "Well, I'm in a conference with students," because that is the kind of response I feel comfortable doing and that I know from writing center work I think is effective. So I've done that.

I think the other piece of that that has maybe become more clear in the last few years, and when I say few years, I mean 10 years, because time flies. So I've been doing research with my friends and colleagues, Anne Geller and Michele Eodice on how seniors at our three different institutions, describe their most meaningful writing projects. Our shift in that, our thinking in that, and we all come from writing center work. So I think that that has been key to this is to understand what students bring to their learning and to take what others have called an asset-oriented approach rather than a deficit-oriented approach. And we see so much in larger attitudes towards student writers that all their deficits that need to be remedied, they bring deficits. In writing centers, I don't think we necessarily take that stance naturally. I think the stance is, well, what do students know how to do? How can we figure that out, and how can we bring that to bear on what they're trying to do now? And so that's been influential, I think, on my teaching and my research. What do students bring? What are their goals? The whole goal setting that you're just discussing for the start of a writing center? How would that work in a classroom setting? And so I'm actually trying to do that in classroom settings.

I have certain goals. Sometimes they're mandated by the curriculum, but students are bringing goals too, and how can we work together? There's a whole movement called students as Partners in Teaching and Learning. And that's been influential for me. And Ann Geller in particular has been influential for me to think about some of that. So when I was getting my master's degree, I applied to be a classroom teacher and got interviewed and then didn't get the job. And the alternative was to go work in the writing center, which I didn't know anything about writing centers. I didn't even know they existed. I certainly didn't know anything about them as an undergrad and I was in two different institutions as an undergrad. It was all very revelatory for me, but I'm really glad it happened.

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