

Episode 129: Nikki Caswell

Transcript

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

In this episode, Nikki Caswell talks about her writing center philosophy at East Carolina University, affect and emotional labor, and writing program administration and writing center training and development.

Dr. Nicole Caswell is the director of the University Writing Center and Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and writing at East Carolina University. Her research interests include emotion, affect writing, assessment and writing centers of the working lives of new writing center directors and forthcoming book *Failing Sideways: Queer Possibilities for Writing Assessment*. Outside of teaching and research, she enjoys Disney, coffee, champagne, and traveling.

Nikki, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You direct the Writing Center at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. What writing center studies scholarship informs your philosophy and practices?

NC: So those that know my research will not be surprised. Some of the earliest pieces that drew me in were those that were more on the psychology side, personality type theory and the ways in which different tutors can embrace their personality type to best work with other writers. That led me then down this whole path of emotion and how does emotion work in the writing center, which has continued to be something that I'm still very, very interested in. So, I've always found that sort of social psychology angle of how people engage to be really both fascinating but really helpful for my own works. And so much of writing center work is people based and writing is a big part of that because you're trying to help them work through a particular piece of writing, but you're also just really trying to help connect with them as a person, trying to build their confidence as writers, trying to help them realize that they're doing good work and just because someone told them in their past that they're a bad writer, that has not necessarily labeled them for life. There's a lot of that social psychology that comes into writing center work and I've always been really, really drawn to that.

In terms of philosophy and practice it's really evolving, since I came up in writing center scholarship as an undergrad and grad student. So much of that day-to-day work has become embodied, those conversations about non-directive and directive tutoring and then the challenges to those. I don't necessarily read much of those anymore, but I know that that grounding of scholarship informs the work I do right now. I'm really just drawn to a lot of the current scholarship and the ways in which it challenges some of our historical notions of what writing center work is and what it can be. I've always been drawn to Nancy Graham and Beth Kay's work. I think Travis Webster's new book has been really helpful in terms of emotional labor and of pushing the boundaries of how we define it and what it is.

*SW: Let's pick up on that and talk more about emotional labor and writing center administration. I'm thinking about your co-authored 2016 article in *Composition Forum* titled*

“Writing Center Administration and/as Emotional Labor.” You mentioned recent research. I’m curious as to what stands out to you about ongoing conversations in scholarship about emotion and writing centers or ways in which you’d like to see the field continue to grow and ask questions about emotion.

NC: I think emotional labor has become one of those terms that we don’t always define in our scholarship because we sort of assume that the reader knows how to define it. I think of those that do define it in their work, we’re all defining it just a little bit different. I’m really fascinated just by that very beginning of just how are we defining this term? Because the definition then informs the ways, the methods that we use and how we go about researching it. So, I think we’re still exploring how we’re defining it and then we’re still exploring how to research it especially empirically because emotions are such a fuzzy thing that aren’t necessarily bound by strict definitions because it changes for each person and a context changes. We’re still sort of working through as a field what these look like and what it means. I know that we always build and expand on ideas and so the definition is going to evolve, but I think we’re still in those early stages of what the term is and how we’re going to use it.

I just finished Travis Webster’s *Queerly Centered* book and he picks up on the definition of emotional labor that Jackie Grutsch McKinney, Rebecca Jackson, and I lay out. But he really nuances it in such a way to bring in the embodied experiences of the queer directors that he has interviewed. I was really taken to that because we didn’t necessarily consider that as part of our study. It didn’t come up in the interviews that we conducted but it was very much a part of the interviews that Travis conducted. So, I’ve really been thinking about that and how that embodiment plays into emotional labor. I have a piece that came out in Wonderful Faison and Frankie Condon’s edited collection where I pick up the idea of intersectional emotional labor, which doesn’t necessarily get at embodiment, but it gets toward how the emotional labor that I can do as a director is not necessarily the same emotional labor that someone can do after me. When we think about writing centers, we think of them as being owned by a particular director after so long. Like the ECU Writing Center, if that’s Nikki’s Writing Center and we try to separate that. But what I can do as a director might not be what somebody else can do in five or six years where they come after me directing the writing center and just thinking about different identity markers and how those shape what is and isn’t allowed to be performed at the university.

There is also a new edited collection, *Emotions and Affect in Writing Centers* picks up on emotional labor but also picks up on the emotion affect more broadly. What’s really interesting about that collection and helpful for the field is starting to think about the ways that we might define emotion and affect as separate things as opposed to just conflating them as the same thing, which is a conversation that’s happening in psychology and sociology and in neuroscience. They’re all having these same conversations of what’s emotion, what’s affect, where does the emotional labor come into play? As a field, writing centers are right along the same path. The next step is how do we study this in the writing center?

SW: What has surprised you the most as a writing center director and what continues to be your favorite part of directing a writing center?

NC: I think what has surprised me the most was actually less about writing centers and more about how universities work. Part of that is because I've been doing writing center work since I was an undergrad. I'm one of those directors that came up through the ranks, so to speak, starting as a tutor, and then in grad school doing the assistant director work, and then landing the director job, which is what I always wanted to do. So, when I started the role, I was ready. I knew how to do the day-to-day stuff. I knew what consulting and tutoring looked like, I knew how to work with other people, but I had absolutely no idea how the process of submitting a job ad and going through new hire paperwork and making sure the I-9s and all the I's were dotted. That was all new. That was difficult to find because they say it's written down somewhere on a website or in the manual, but you can't necessarily always find where it's written down. It's changed in the last two years. There's always this moving target of paperwork that I've had to keep up with as a director. That is probably the most surprising thing because I don't think that came up really much at all in my writing center work prior to that. It's still the one thing that surprises me. I think something will be super easy and then two weeks later, I'm still working through emails trying to figure out which hoop to jump through to make sure it'll be approved by someone higher up.

My favorite part has been just working with students across campus and that's really what drew me to writing center work. From the beginning I came to the writing center as a math major. Many people have heard this story, but I was hired as sort of the liaison to the math department. I was an okay writer, not great, but I was okay. They thought that I was really great at talking about writing at Kent State and it only took a semester until I realized this is what I really wanted to do. I loved sitting down and talking about writing to other students, to my peers. I loved talking to the other tutors about what strategies had worked, what wasn't working, why they were working, and why they weren't working. Then I was able to go to regional conferences as an undergrad and grad student. Once I realized that there was this whole community of people talking about how writing works and how to best help other writers, I got sucked in. That still continues, just working with writers and then working with the consultants that we hire and helping them find their fit into this field.

SW: How do you go about training and developing and introducing consultants to writing center scholarship? What does onboarding look like at East Carolina University and are there certain response strategies or practices that you encourage consultants to keep in mind as they offer feedback to student writing?

NC: We're working with people and while the writing is important, the person is the most important in that moment, and then the writing will come after. A lot of our onboarding is really focused on engaging with people. I joke a little bit, but I feel like a lot of our work is really retooling how to people because we've been doing virtual and online work so much that as we move back into the center and do this face-to-face work, we're really rethinking through what body language looks like and how do you read body language and how do you anticipate possible responses from a writer when you say something. We were used to being in classrooms and could read each other, but after the last two years or so, we've lost some of that kind of innate ability to read other people. A lot of our work right now is just really rethinking how to people and how to read people and using that as an entry point to helping them with their writing.

Big overview: what our onboarding looks like is through a Canvas course. It takes a week or a week and a half to work through it and we have a set of modules that reflect the values of our space. One of those modules is on anti-racist work in the writing center and social justice since that's a key component of what we do. Another module is more of the day-to-day work. Here's how you respond to a student writer, here's what our consultant report form looks like. Here's how you use WC Online, which is the system that we use to make appointments. Then we have a module just like, "these are the values of our space, this is who we are as a community, and this is what is expected of you as you become a person of this community." From there they move into an observation stage where they watch returning consultants have sessions and they do that for about a week and reflect on that. Now that we're back in person, we can move to our third phase, which is a collaborative consulting phase where they get a chance to consult with one of the returning consultants.

It isn't so much just thrown out there to try it by themselves, but to have that other person to bounce ideas off of so if they get stuck, they're not just staring at another writer in the silence, but that there's someone there to help guide them to the next space. We found that it takes about a month or so and that month long onboarding really helps pull them into the writing center community because as they're working through all this, then we're mentioning the different theories of writing down the scholarship that comes up, we're talking about the different techniques that they're using and how that's grounded in various types of learning theory. What might work for one writer doesn't necessarily work for the other. We have them reflecting on their own processes and their own practices and then thinking about someone who might come at it from the opposite point of view. The one thing that we always remind them at the very beginning, at the end, in the middle is that we are working with people. Even if you're responding to a paper online and the student's not there for tutoring, to remember that there is a student on the other side, there is a writer there. We are people first. Always remember that what we say matters, what we say can impact students, and just to remember really that we're people.

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