

Pedagogue Bonus: How Do We Read and Teach Policy? (w/Genevieve García de Müller)

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue Bonus, a short episode that covers a single topic or question. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this bonus episode, Genevieve García de Müller talks about reading and teaching policy.

Genevieve Garcia de Mueller is the Director of WAC and an assistant professor at Syracuse University. Her work focuses on writing across the curriculum, antiracism, writing program administration, and policy studies. Her publications have included the co-authored "Inviting Students to Determine for Themselves What It Means to Write Across the Disciplines," and "Race, Silence, and Writing Program Administration: A Qualitative Study of U.S. College Writing Programs." In 2020, she received an AAUW American Publication Grant for her manuscript *Shifting Landscapes: The Deliberative Rhetoric of Citizenship in U.S. Immigration Policy*. Her Antiracist WAC program received the 2021 CCCC Writing Program Certificate of Excellence Award.

Genevieve, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: As a field, we talk a lot about needing to change our systems and structures to better support teachers and students. We critically investigate these systems and we challenge traditional notions of teaching writing. For example, I'm thinking about how we talk a lot about policies that uphold white supremacist ideologies, and then we suggest alternatives that are more equitable and that are more just. We generate new program ideas or classroom practices and even attempt to really reconceptualize our organizations and journals to be more inclusive, to be anti-racist. I imagine many of us are processing this kind of work and doing this kind of work in our classes. And then I imagine some of us do this kind of work, but we don't necessarily know where to begin to transform program or university policy, or even how to talk about policy with students. So I'm hoping you could share how you prompt students or encourage them to think through and to read policy and how you teach policy in your writing classes.

GGdM: I'll say it depends on the policy. [laughs] I'll give you an actual answer, I promise. So but it really does depend on the policy. What I do in my class is I have this...the first time that I actually taught the graduate policy studies course, one of my students at the beginning of the semester was like, "When does policy get fun?" And I was like, "Wait a minute. I don't know if this is about my teaching or this is about policy." They're like, "No, no, no. It's about policy. When does it get fun?" And I said, "I think policy gets fun when you realize how it impacts everything." I mean, everyone says rhetoric is everywhere. Well, policy is everywhere. It's actually everywhere. It affects you every single day of your life.

And so, I mean, it's just like any other rhetorical act. We have to understand who is the body or who are the persons who are creating this document? Who are they creating it for? What is the context around this document? What is the sort of framework of this document? What is commonly done? So for example, if we were going to read a bill that was introduced into

Congress, then we would have to understand the citation practices because citation practices in the bill are completely different than citation practices in an academic article. Almost every other line will be referencing another bill. To understand how to read that, we have to understand the genre of it. I'll teach the genre of a legislative bill at the federal level. Or I'll teach a genre of the state bill at the state level.

So we have to understand the components of it, not only the citation practices, but we have to understand language choices that are formatted because everything is very, very formatted. We even talk about how it's written in a way to make sure that certain populations can not access it. That's the whole purpose of this bill is to really make sure that community has no clue what's actually happening in this bill. So we also talk about that. Who is this leaving out? What language choices are being made to, on purpose, leave people out of this conversation? So we also do that.

I go through SCOTUS hearings. There's this really great website called oyez.com. It's O-Y-E-Z.com. You can listen to judicial hearings. So you can listen to SCOTUS hearings and it has this transcript in front of you so you can listen to it. For example, if you wanted to listen to the Loving [v. Virginia] hearing, you could listen to that. One of the most historic...if you want to listen to Roe v. Wade, you could listen to that because it was recorded and you have the transcript in front of you.

A heck of a lot of genre analysis. So there's a lot of just understanding conventions, understanding citation practices, understanding the language choices, why they make those language choices.

A lot of my students at the undergraduate level, they will choose things like federal bills or state bills, but most often they'll choose things like institutional policies. So they might take the student handbook at Syracuse University. Or they might take, if they're a part of a sorority or fraternity, they might take their handbook or their manual, their rules. Or if they're an athlete, they might take the NCAA handbook. So those are different policies in different genres. We'll also have to do the same kind of work. We'll do a genre analysis of who their audience is, what they're doing. It's the same sort of format that you would see in almost any kind of freshman composition course where you're really doing a significant amount of genre work.

What's interesting is that by the time, so we've done all of this prior work where we've interrogated language, we've spoken to our communities, we've interviewed people that talk specifically about issues within the community that need to be addressed. We've understood the activist context in our hometown or in our home neighborhood or whatever it is. So by the time they get to the actual policy work, there's a significant amount of context that they've already built and buy-in. They start with the personal and they start with these human connections and understanding of how these things have affected them. And then they get to this technical work where, and they sort of have, at that point, I feel have a purpose for reading it.

So if I was just to sort of give them a bill at the beginning of the course and say, "Okay, we're going to do this genre analysis for three days of this bill that you don't understand of how it affects your life." I think, yeah, I would not probably have the same effect. But because we've

spent two months thinking about all these issues within our community. And then we say, “Oh, wow, it manifests in this stop and frisk. Or it manifests in the way DWI laws have a higher impact indigenous communities in our state. Or it manifests in this thing.”

I understand all this other stuff. And now I'm looking at, this is how it materially affects me and my community. This is what it does and this is how my legislators are criminalizing me. Or this is specifically how my legislators are creating a public discourse that will lead to a higher incarceration rate in my state. It kind of leads into that. I think it depends on how you set it up and how you go into that. And I do the same kind of work in I would say in my graduate course. We might start with the technical work a little bit earlier than I would with my undergrads because their product or the thing that they create at the end of the semester is going to be a little more in depth.

But everything is contextualized first. We have to think about where this policy is coming from and who it's affecting before we actually get to the technical work that we need to do with genre.