

Pedagogue Bonus: Establishing Community Partnerships (w/Lauren Cagle)

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this bonus episode, I talk with Lauren Cagle about community engagement.

Lauren Cagle is an Assistant Professor of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies (WRD) and Associate Faculty in Environmental and Sustainability Studies (ENS) at the University of Kentucky. Her research and teaching focus on overlaps among digital rhetorics and scientific and technical communication. Cagle frequently works with local and regional environmental and technical practitioners; her collaborative partners include the Kentucky Division for Air Quality, the Kentucky Geological Survey, the University of Kentucky Recycling Program, and The Arboretum, State Botanical Garden of Kentucky. Cagle's work has appeared in *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *the Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, *Rhetoric Review*, and *Computers & Composition*.

Cagle, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: So, your teaching and research are deeply connected to community engagement and really community partnerships. You focus on global awareness and public outreach, and I was hoping that you could spend some time talking about how you would go about encouraging others to build these connections between writing pedagogy and establishing connections with local communities.

LC: I love this question so much. I mean, so much of my scholarly identity right now is about trying to break down those silos and borders. I remember having these conversations back in 2015. I went to one of the RSA summer institutes, this was in Madison at the University of Wisconsin, and it was a rhetoric of science seminar led by Carolyn Miller, Leah Ceccarelli, and Lynda Olman. There were just so many cool people in that room doing so many cool things. And at the time I was just digging my teeth into my dissertation, getting ready to go on the job market, figuring out my place in things. I met a couple of people that I was like, "This is who I want to be." So Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, Bridie McGreavy, who's in communication rhetoric, Nate Stormer, and these are folks who do that engaged community work.

Some other folks coming up alongside me who have really adopted that: Kenny Walker, Sara Parks. But then if you start looking around the field and move outside of science or environment, you start seeing these little pockets of people who are doing this work. So Rebecca Walton and Kristen Moore and Natasha Jones in tech comm, Michele Simmons also in tech comm and community rhetorics. Then you start thinking about the community writing folks. We've got a whole conference for that, conference and organization. Tim Amidon does this work with firefighters of which he is one.

So, once I started realizing, “I don't have to box myself in, I don't have to put a label on myself. It's okay to be a Venn diagram.” I remember getting really, really head up in grad school about, “Am I in tech comm or am I in rhetoric of science?”

Then eventually I was like, “Sure. Okay. Yes. The answer is yes.” And in terms of actually developing connections and becoming a person who does that work as opposed to a person who aspires to do that work, again, I was very concerned about what that process would look like. One thing that I do know is that it's very hard to do as a graduate student because you're precarious, you don't have a lot of time, and also you're expecting to leave, right? So, the idea of building long term relationships with community partners. I think there are ways to do it. I think as an individual, you can do it by being really deliberate about, for example, connecting with an organization, perhaps that isn't locally specific. What I would love to see is something like the system that we have in the sciences where graduate students come onto PIs lab leader's projects, right? So I might have a community project and I take on a graduate student who works with me on that. So, they can sort of piggyback on that relationship and get trained and then go out and develop their own.

When I got to University of Kentucky in 2016, I basically spent the first year, and this was very deliberate, and some of my senior colleagues who were very concerned about my tenure trajectory freaked out a little bit about this, but I spent my first year mostly not in my office, mostly saying “yes” to everything on campus. I went to all kinds of lectures. I went to anything...a lot of, especially larger universities or research universities, will have mingling hours. UK has shifted some of that stuff online to try and ignite interdisciplinary collaborations, that kind of thing. So, just meeting other people on campus in other disciplines. And then also saying yes to scary things like speaking at the March for Science, which I originally said “no” to, and the graduate student in geography who was helping organize that March, who had asked me, shout out Eric, was like, “Are you sure? Are you sure, though? You'd be great.”

I was like, “That sounds terrifying. No, thank you.” And he was like, “No, you'd be great.” And so, I finally said “yes,” and I'm very glad I did.

I gave a talk to the bioethics program over in the College of Medicine. They wanted me to come talk about climate denial. I just said yes to everything. I didn't get a lot done in terms of publications that year. I did a good job teaching my classes because I was very nervous to not do a good job. But it wasn't that traditional first year professor, you're supposed to buckle down, whatever, and it paid off. All of my collaborations that I have now are a direct result from something that happened early on in that first year. Even if it wasn't, “I met this person,” it might have been, “I met this person who invited me to this thing and then I went to this other thing and then I gave a talk and someone saw it and came up to me and said, ‘Hey, I would love to work with you on X.’”

So as a result, I, in addition to the Division for Air Quality that I mentioned, which has been my primary teaching collaboration, and the Kentucky Geological Survey, I also work with the state Arboretum. With that one, we haven't done classroom specific things, but I have hired a bunch of undergraduate research assistants to work on that project and have also had students who got

really interested in it and did it as independent studies. So, that collaboration has allowed to support undergraduate research.

And then I also have a new partnership with University of Kentucky Recycling. I don't know this all seems much more fun to me than sitting in my office. I think it helps to be an extrovert, but fun fact, I'm like a fake extrovert. I'm going to go stare at a wall for two hours after we're done talking here. I think you don't have to be an extrovert. You just have to genuinely be interested in doing work with other people. And that's the last thing I want to say about that, is when you are interested in doing work with other people, you have to be realistic about what that looks like. And that means it's going to take more time and it's going to require more emotional energy than if you're just by yourself writing. You are going to have to do a lot of educating. So, one of the things that Roberta from the Division for Air Quality told me was that it had never occurred to her to partner with a writing or a technical communication course because a lot of folks in these spaces are thinking it in terms of topics.

So, if you're a geological organization, you might think of service learning with a geology course, but that's it. Or if you're in environmental education, you might think of partnering with an environmental course. And so being somebody who's willing to go out and educate or share about the field, about what is rhetoric, what is tech comm, I think is a really crucial part of it.

You have to be willing to, I think, be humble and do that in a way that isn't patronizing and you also have to be willing to be humble and just like copy edit stuff for people. If people are like, "Oh, you're really good at writing. Can you check this fire out for me?"

"Yes, yes I can."

Then down the road we have an established connection and maybe we can build something more interesting.