

Episode 69: Sherry Rankins-Robertson

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

I want to take just a second and say thank you for listening to the podcast. Over the last several days I've received a handful of messages and emails from people who listen and have been asking how they can further support the podcast, and I've just been overwhelmed by the generosity of people. Pedagogue is coming up on two years. I'm so thankful for the support over these last two years. I've been fortunate to talk with wonderful people and to hear from those who follow along. I mean this from the bottom of my heart, and if you know me, you know this is true, this podcast wouldn't exist without you, and without these kind words of affirmation that I receive. So really, truly, thank you so much.

In this episode, I talk with Sherry Rankins-Robertson about online pedagogy, mentoring, writing program administration, self-care, and prison writing.

Sherry Rankins-Robertson is Chair and Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Central Florida. Her passion for student success has fueled her energy to build successful, sustainable higher education programs to improve students' experiences both on campus and in the community. For the past twenty years, Sherry has taught first-year writing; she also teaches nonfiction writing and graduate-level theory courses. For more than a decade, she has taught writing in prisons. Her research has appeared in *Kairos*, *Computers and Composition*, *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, and the *Journal of Writing Assessment* along with more than a dozen diverse edited collections. Sherry is an officer for the Council of Writing Program Administrators and serves as a member of the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

Sherry, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Let's start by talking about online pedagogy and practices, which is something you've done a lot of work in. What would you identify as some key factors that help foster student success in an online learning environment?

SRR: Thank you, and I just want to say first, thanks for having me, but more so, thank you for doing this. Your podcast series is I think a gift to our discipline. To have access to the recorded voices of our field is something that you're capturing. As somebody who examines mentoring and that concept of academic families, I'm grateful for the resource that you're building, and I know how much work this is as somebody who works in multimodality. So anyway, I'm really grateful to you, Shane. So thank you for this work.

I'm going to start by giving you the short answer. I think the short answer is student preparation. It's orientations to what it means to be an online learner, what does it mean to facilitate your own time management as you and I both know, to be an online learner means to be incredibly disciplined and oftentimes students that are brand new to college, they struggle with time management.

There are definitely disciplinary differences and online spaces, and what it means to take an online math class looks different, that an online biology class looks different than online writing class. I think a lot of institutions have had an LMS orientation where you learn what you learn via Canvas. I don't think that's enough. All of us who teach online, we know that it's really not enough. So this past April in light of COVID, I contacted our provost office where I used to work in a position I used to work and I wrote to them about a true need for student support. I think we've always known that that was needed, but COVID has really given us a call to action in a different kind of way.

In late spring and into early summer, I worked with a team of individuals that were faculty in lots of different disciplines and instructional designers. We had a couple of students currently at the institution and alumni and then administrators, and we built this thing called "Online Student Success Bests" I think is what we called it. We launched that in late summer and what it was, it was the live event where students came on and they interacted with us in person. Then there was content that they worked through that were in the course modules. What we were hoping is that we were sending freshmen into a classroom so that they were better able to understand what does it mean to be a successful online learner.

Our scholarship hedges to this and there is the OWI, you know, the OWI community resources as a whole. The CCCCs statement of OWI principles, one specifically addresses student preparation. Then of course we have scholars work like Scott Warnock's work and Beth Hewitt's work and [Kevin Eric] De Pew's work that looks at what does it mean to build a learning environment that's conducive for students to be successful? I think that again is a lot of the work that's come out of the OWI community. Tiffany Bourelle has a brand new book that's about to come out through MLA that talks about online student success for students. Right this very moment, I'm super excited about, let me think for a second, Casey McArdle and Jessie Borgman's work, and they do work on PARS, and that stands for personal, accessible, responsive, strategic.

That strategic part to me, I mean, I think again, a lot of us have been doing some of those things, Shane, right? Like to personalize our teaching. Building videos, outreach to students, this opportunity where we see each other face to face and chat with folks in real time. Accessibility, I think is something that we've been talking about in our discipline for a long time. Responsiveness, as far as how we're engaging with our learners in the LMS shell, but also, when we provide written feedback to students or other types of feedback to students as Tiffany and a couple of colleagues all wrote about in our *Kairos* piece that looks at multi-modal instruction.

But they're strategic for me is a dead on ringer because they talk about strategic, not only just in design and strategic and instruction, but they talk about strategic and administration. For me as an administrator, I think they call us to pay close attention to what are the conditions for successful online learning, and oftentimes our institutions tie our hands at some of the things that we haven't had the ability to control like student class size. This scholarship talks about how we have a responsibility.

SW: So a lot of your teaching and research centers on writing program administration and mentoring. You're the chair for the Department of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Central Florida. Before that, you served as the Director of Composition and Literacy Coordinator at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Can you talk about your administrative values and then what kinds of practical ways you help mentor and develop writing teachers?

SRR: Yeah, so the first part of that question, I fall back to our scholarship. Louise Wetherbee Phelps, she talks about the idea of what it means to be a leader and what that looks like. So sometimes we conflate that with a single powerful individual that dominates activity, and she rejects that. I agree with her in the census that leadership is a more dynamic system. And that's how she talks about in her article, "Turtles All The Way Down." This discipline is rooted in academic community, or at least it always has been for me, and I want to acknowledge that if it hasn't been for other people, I think we need to do better for those individuals so that we are all pulled into the fold of what it means to be part of this community.

Particularly the CWPA community is a tight knit group and I'm grateful for that community. I've had the privilege of tremendous mentoring that has come to me, and I take that very seriously. I think about that as a pay-it-forward concept, and that mentoring hasn't always, if we think, sometimes traditionally we think about the person who was my diss-chair or the person who was a supervisor, those folks certainly have mentored me and I think lots of us can look at those relationships and say, "What did we gain or learn from that?" I was taught how to produce academic writing as a result of that relationship with my dissertation chair. However, mentoring, I think can come across from each other. I think mentoring is the caveat of like, what's the most important part of my job as an administrator. We oftentimes, and I say we, I mean, collectively, we get pulled in the direction of taking care of really important things like budgets and student retention data and strategic plans, those are critical parts of any administrative job.

But I think that day in day out is the community that we foster, and the spaces for people to come forward and are working with the faculty members. You know, there's a concept that Melvin Beavers has written about in his dissertation, and he talks about the idea of "administrative rhetorical mindfulness." That that term for him comes out of the tenants of what it means to be a servant leader. And we know that body of work of servant leader work. So when you become a servant leader, you show your community that I am in this with you, that I do the work with you, that I consult with you, that we collaborate. Thank you for being here, thank you for contributing to this, acknowledging people's work, helping people figure out what are their, and I pause for a

second, because I thought this is out of Duane Roen's mouth, "Helping people understand what did you come here to do? How can I help you achieve what it is that you want to do?"

I really have taken that to heart in our discipline. As far as practical ways for mentoring and developing writing teachers, with graduate student teachers that looks like something very different than with tenure track faculty members or non-tenure track faculty members. I think the important part is where is that individual and what do we know that they need. And sometimes as you may recall from your own graduate student teaching, and I remember when I was a brand new graduate student teacher, I didn't know what I necessarily needed. I didn't know how to ask for that, but I can tell you I was prepping way too much, I was spending a lot of time trying to figure out all the answers in case someone asked me X about Y, so I had an answer. I quickly learned that that's not going to work. You've got to go in there with your theory and you have to at any given moment, be able to hit pause and say, "Okay, what pedagogy is happening here? What theorist am I honoring or valuing?"

So as someone who teaches composition theory, that has been important for me and helping our graduates students understand in any given moment, is this Lunsford at play? Is this Vygotsky? Who is happening in this moment in time with my students. But, with non-tenure track faculty members, I think that looks very different. It's about ensuring that they're part of the community, that their voices are heard. And then tenure track faculty ensuring that there is a plan that help people get successfully to third-year review, deeply understanding not just the disciplinary documents, but the departmental and the institutional documents.

As you already know, we get ourselves buried in a lot of service work. How do you have healthy boundaries? I almost said successful boundaries, but I don't know if they're actually successful all the time. But healthy boundaries of saying, "I'm happy to do this at this point in time," or "I've already taken on this," And having somebody help you negotiate. What are the things you want me to be focused on as your WPA or in this particular role? So continuing to serve as somebody who helps people protect their time, which we don't always know how to do ourselves as you and I both know.

SW: What kind of advice would you give to a new WPA?

SRR: The first piece of advice I would give anybody who's brand new to their job, which I always do is go to the WPA workshop. It's housed every year in the CWPA conference. It's usually right before the conference begins, but they've rotated that at different times. But it's about a three-day opportunity to be in class. And I mean that just in the way that it sounds. With a seasoned, very experienced WPAs in our field, who help you negotiate the challenges that you will face in these jobs. I learned early on that it was important for me to have allies, which I met at the WPA conference.

I regularly identify those people as sort of my academic sisters in the census that I could call them at any moment's notice and say, "I'm struggling with this, I need help with that," and it's safe, right? I'm not saying to my boss, "I don't know how to do something," Or I'm not saying to

a colleague like, “But you're able to think this through.” Sometimes you know that the answer that you are thinking is not always the answer that you need to give, and so you have to think more strategically. So having really smart people around you who are doing a similar kind of job at different institutes helps you learn this is a common feature of what it means to do this work, opposed to what's happening at this particular location and trying to understand it.

That workshop taught me a tremendous number of different things, but one of the things it taught me was the importance of historical context, which all of us seem to know, but when you come into a new job, you're always a little bit eager to jump in and take on the charge that the search committee or the department chair, or the Dean has given to you. You usually get marching orders when you're new. That doesn't gel super well with the faculty or the body of people who've been doing that work sometimes. I had to have those experiences, so connecting with the mentoring programs, the WPA also has a mentoring program that Joe Janangelo runs. But inside your own institution, there are usually mentoring programs and I worked in Little Rock in a mentoring program where we were assigned individuals who are not in our college and not in our departments. It was helpful because somebody could be objective about what are your tenure and promotion guideline expectations. Let's look at what it says in here, and let's build a plan for you.

I think that is incredibly helpful that someone is objectively looking at your documents, and not, again, not necessarily somebody in your college who's experienced those same documents, or they're able to you point out, “This doesn't feel super clear, you might ask your chair or your Dean about these kinds of things.” So both inside your institutions and in our discipline as a whole, as you know, and when we think about working with GTAs, I mean, it's maybe always been this way, but it seems like graduate students are coming into the marketplace with more significant publications and grants. So we know that the key for tenure is publication.

How do we have a strategic plan for publication? In my WPA workshop, Shirley Rose was one of the leaders in my workshop, and she talked about having your working document up all the time on your screen. Then when you have a 15-minute window, dropping everything down and writing for 15 minutes. And whenever she taught us that, I thought, “I don't think I can write for 15 minute windows,” but now I have learned that if 15 minutes is what I get, that's when I'm going to work on this. And throughout the day, I might cobble together enough time to work on the publications, any kind of administrators' advocacy work. That feels scary when you're pre-tenured or you're untenured, because what does that look like?

I think it's critical for administrators to look at inclusivity and whose voices are not being heard, and looking at how do we collaborate on curricular concepts and ideas so that everyone gets to be included rather than...I reject the top-down model as much as I can. I reject any kind of top-down decision making, “This is how we're going to do it.” But there are lots of things that we do have power within our own departments. To create grassroots programs are oftentimes more successful programs than dictating to people this is how you will teach, or these are the materials you will teach with. As somebody who was a non-tenure track faculty member at the beginning

of my career, essentially I was given a textbook and a syllabus and told to do that. I thought, “What just happened in here?”

When you talk to a brand new WPA, there's a lot of things you want to tell them. It's like people when they're brand new parents, our daughter is raised up now and she's 25, you want to tell brand new parents all the important things, right? You know from being a parent that you have to experience these things. The work will teach you how to do the work, and it's about building the community around you who can sustain you, and you can call, and I remember a lot of times calling Ed [White] or Duane [Roen] saying, “I have a writing faculty member, who's designing a writing assignment and it's about something to do with aliens and we're a standalone rhet/comp program, all non-fiction.” They would say, “Okay, well, here's how you do that.” I mean, that might not seem like a big ask, but in the moment you think to yourself, “Not really sure how to handle this.”

Having this strong community around me that can help me on things that were more nuanced that needed their attention. I mean, some of these pillars in our community as you've tagged them, and then sometimes just my disciplinary siblings who I know who are going through these same kinds of things. So I think the last thing I would say is if there's any way to learn about self-care, and understanding burnout, and the longevity of how to successfully do this work, we have to get that at the forefront. I mean, the CWPA has started to have some workshops on that this past summer and the digital conference. I think that's an important concept because as graduate students, we are very seldom taught to take good care of ourselves and prioritize sleep, have a plan for daily exercise. I know that those are concepts that may sound like, “Oh, well, that's something we learned as children,” but we quickly learn to trade those things away. I think that is the fall for many of us as administrators is the burn out.

SW: Self-care is so important, and you just mentioned it in the context of writing program administration. Maybe we can turn our attention to teaching. How do we center self-care in our writing classes?

SRR: So, well, let me just back up and say that I started research on self-care because “researcher heal thyself” is what Brené Brown always says. I started researching self-care because I wasn't doing a super good job of caring for myself. I needed to be much more intentional. I took a class on the science of happiness. It was offered through Yale University. I started looking, again, it's full of statistical data and so that resonates with me because it pings my logical side and I thought, “Sure, that makes all good sense. So what does that look like?” And so, I started thinking about self-care within the lens of our discipline, and I developed a course on the rhetoric of self-care that was taught for both undergrads and grads. The reason I really felt passionate about the graduate student experience was because that, as I indicated earlier, that's where we learned to start trading things away, like sleep, which is something we shouldn't trade away.

But I don't think we learn it in grad school. I think we learn it, there's some moment in time where we start saying things like, "I was up all night on this paper," and that's really about time management, right? But then at some point in our careers, we start to take on so much so that we can build out our CVs to get into these job markets. Like horses on a track, trying to get into the jobs. I mean, it is a full process. I wanted to kind of pull back and look at what does that look like? So that particular class focused on work within our discipline within the academy. As a result of that class, so I started integrating projects on self-care in first year composition classes, and I would talk to students about the concept of what does self-care mean and ask them to locate resources on campus that help exemplify their own, or exemplifies not the right verb, but foster their own self-care.

So like counseling services. Many students will come and say like, "Oh, well, I don't know about that. That's just for, you know," and I would normalize that. I think it's important for us to talk about mental wellness. And so let's talk about why it's important to speak to someone who is a professional trained counselor, rather than our friends. We go to the least qualified people to make our biggest life decisions. So it's like changing the oil in our car, right? You want someone qualified to do that work, you get a professional haircut, usually, you want someone qualified do that work. Your mental wellness is like your physical wellness. So just normalizing the language of what does that mean? Like, why to even get a flu shot? Why is that important kind of thing?

So they looked at all of those different resources. I think some of it in the classroom is building projects where people engage in an immersion project of some kind, that's what we did, a 30-day immersion project and another class that I developed so that people could think, what does this really mean as far as changing my habits? I think also what does that mean for the faculty member, right? It's about an intentionally designed curriculum that remains flexible. And so self-care for you as the faculty member might be deciding, "I'm going to record this certain aspect, and I'm going to put this out there for the people who are not here. And then I'm going to have this opportunity for people who are a drop in," right? How we're choosing to use that time, and frankly, our own time.

There's lots of scholarship talks to us about giving students feedback and the amount of time that we spend on giving students written feedback, and I choose to always give my students, I do video capture on their documents and I walk them through their piece. And then I give them some summative comments because I believe that writing is all part of a process and they're going to improve it for their portfolio anyway. I think that's a little bit of self-preservation for me, it's not as long to make the video as it would be for me to actually put the written comments down. I think it could look like a lot of things, and I'm eager to have more people come forward and talk about what that means for them as writing teachers.

SW: Sherry, can you talk a little more about that immersion project you assign?

SRR: So the idea of that project comes from Ernest Coggins, who teaches his students to do immersion projects, where they go into cultural environments and they experience, a particular

community. Like for example, I took American Sign Language whenever I was in college and we were asked to go out, well, we were asked to go out into the deaf community and to engage in that community, and come back and write about it. As a hearing person, I don't know all of the same cultural norms of the deaf community, but I'm studying it. I did engage with, through ASL, with the community in which I participated but let them know immediately that I'm a hearing person. Because as you may know, in ASL, if you don't identify as a hearing person, or if you don't indicate to folks that you can read sign, there could be eavesdropping that goes on, right?

So anyway, I took that idea of a project and turned it into a 30-day, because we know that habits are formed in 21 days. That's what the science tells us. So I wanted students to engage in a four-week activity, and they all chose their own immersion projects. They wrote proposals to say what immersion technique they were going to be engaged in. Some people said things like meditation, and their proposal said something like five minutes a day. I thought, "Five minutes is a good amount of time, but you might scale that back and then tear it up like one minute this week, two minutes that week, three minutes that week," because true meditation is very difficult to do.

So part of the immersion project is learning about this, but they would journal about how this was working, and what kinds of interrupters occurred, and what our mind does when we're trying to do something like meditation and or something like yoga. Some folks chose to do a reading assignment or writing projects. You might be hearing that thinking like, "Where does the rhetoric of that come in?" And it's about the metacognition. It is about the capability for us to experience something into say, physically, how is this changing me? Mentally, how is this changing me? Is this something sustainable I would want to do? The students who were most successful were the ones who stuck with it and did it every single day. And not just Monday through Friday, every single day. The students who struggled the most were people who wanted like for week one to do this thing, and week two to do this other thing, because they wanted like a sampler platter for an appetizer. They were excited to try so many things. And that was the thinking behind it.

Some folks just chose to journal every single day. One person did, it's called like a food mood journal, and she was a runner, she was an athlete on campus. She talked about the food she put in her body and what moods that it was creating for her. There are materials from a nutritionist that she brought in, she was studying nutrition. I was hoping that they would pull in something of interest to them and something that was rooted in what we had been reading. We did several weeks building up to this where they were able to understand or learn about different things like meditation or a yoga. One week where we did tracking of our sleep, and tracking of our technology, and as somebody who experienced academic burnout, I have to tell you physically getting sick is what healed me, it's what made me better. I realized I didn't want to be sick like that again.

The intentionality, what it means to care for my physical self, but my emotional self and my relationships is so important to me. And whenever I'm not doing good at that, like right now on a brand new job, I'm not doing super great at that, I think to myself, "Don't be a hypocrite, you

can't do this research and do this writing and talk about this on Shane's podcast and not hold yourself accountable for it.”

SW: Thanks for sharing that, Sherry. Taking care of our physical, mental, and emotional health and reflecting on our overall well-being is incredibly important. This is my last question. In 2011, you co-wrote an article on prison writing, the right to education, prison-university partnerships, and how digital technologies provide opportunities for social activism. Do you mind talking more about your experiences collaborating with prisons and inmates, and what you've learned about teaching writing through those interactions and experiences?

SRR: That publication was one of the first publications that I wrote on prison education, and it was a result of work that I was doing with a colleague at Arizona State University, Joe Walker, and we built a prison education program together. There was an established in-person program that was about halfway between Tucson and Phoenix. We went to a facility there and we taught in-person, but we built a partnership with the prison up in New Mexico, Penitentiary of New Mexico. And so that particular program was, everything was digital, if you will, but it wasn't digital in the way that you and I might think of working with writers. The students themselves did not have technology. They hand wrote on a piece of paper, and as a participant in another project, these guys are maximum security facility, on lock down 23 hours a day. They got 12 sheets, single sheets of loosely paper. And then if you were to take your pen apart, the insert that sits inside your pen that holds the ink, they got pen inserts to do their writing. And so those were their tools for writing.

I bring that to attention because I hear students tell me all the time that have lots of technology is available to them and the internet and all kinds of things, “I just can't produce text,” and I think, “Well, I think we probably can revisit that idea.” But anyway, so they're part of our program, they produce writing then the prison education director puts it in manila envelopes and mailed it to me to campus. And then I took it out, we had a team of folks and we scanned all of it. I read all of it first to make sure that it met security protocol. We scanned all of it, and then we uploaded into a Blackboard shell. And then we had a group of students who took the class, and those individuals, there were writing interns, and we used writing center theory to familiarize them with how do we respond to writers? So we looked at higher order concerns. We used like, you know, the concept of how we do responsive writing, responses to those individuals.

Then we type up their work, we wrote them letters, telling them all the good things about their document and the places where we thought that they could work, and we would give them certain lines to focus on, and not grammatically, but you know where this is working, we need more description here or whatnot, depending on the piece of writing they sent to us. I would send all of those back to the facility and then the prison education director would go in and set it in the cells for the individuals in the one hour that they were outside of their cells a day.

So we did that for many years, and every summer I would drive up to, well, I would fly to Albuquerque and then drive up to Santa Fe and stay for a week at the local hotel and go over

every day and interview the individuals who were a part of the program. It was the most humbling work that I've ever been a part of, because, well, for a lot of reasons, a lot, a lot of reasons. The lack of humanity that happens inside those learning spaces is very difficult to see, the enthusiasm of the writers is incredible in that space. But also in a weekly class that you go into and maybe a medium or a lower security prison, folks are so excited to write and wicked smart, and they're eager to share their writing, and, you know, right after class, many people are missing the opportunity to go to lunch, which it's not like they can pop over to Taco Bell and get lunch at 2:00pm, lunch is served at this one time. But standing in line to say, thank you for coming here. Thank you for being a part of it.

Joe and I wrote that particular piece making an argument for prison education. There was a large community within CCCCs of individuals that all teach within prisons. There's a book written by Patrick Berry and it's called *Doing Time, Writing Lives*, and it's a fairly new publication. I think this is just one of the best books because he leaves his own narrative in with what does it mean to be inside these incarcerated spaces. But as a result of the work that Joe and I were doing, not just with that article that you mentioned, the work that we did at CCCCs, presentations that we did, the programs that we built, we did an edited collection and that edited collection is called *Prison Pedagogies*. One of the things that we found was that there wasn't a lot of texts that actually looked at the pedagogy of what was happening in a prison education classroom.

The infrastructure is different than it is on a college campus. But you, as a writing teacher, are utilizing many of the same strategies, but you're adapting the strategies that you use in a face-to-face classroom. People always, well, not always, but some people ask, "What is it like to teach in a prison?" I think media misrepresents it the same way, you know, how media misrepresents teachers. How they make us stand on the desk and say things like, "Captain, oh, my captain," right? I've never stood on top of my desk in a classroom and had students shout out like that. But again, media portrays a certain idea and media portrays what it is like in a prison, and I think it's falsely represented.

So a lot of the scholarship before was the narratives of teachers who went into these spaces and they were the things I did, right? And they worked well, or they didn't work well, but some of them were about that. There were lots of books about prison education programs as a whole. Like the bar program up in, I think, Syracuse that has an exceptional retention rates for individuals staying outside of prisons. But this book looks specific lists, but Joe and I did on *Prison Pedagogies*, and so that, just like we have composition theory, we need some theory that helps guide us to when we work in specialized spaces, like in communities, which to me prison education is about community engaged writing. What are the theories that help guide us in that space, depending on what you're teaching. So you'll find lots of teachers in there, they're teaching art versus theater versus composition. What does that look like? So we were really grateful for Syracuse to print that text.

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