

Episode 17: Staci M. Perryman-Clark

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Staci M. Perryman-Clark. And we sort of move back and forth between these intricate educational layers. Education is a complex system with a lot of interconnected elements. We talk about writing program administration, program initiatives and development, Afrocentric and language rights pedagogies in the writing classroom, institutional policies, and student success.

Staci M. Perryman-Clark is an Associate Professor of English and Gender and Women's Studies at Western Michigan University. Her book *Afrocentric Teacher-Research: Rethinking Appropriateness and Inclusion* is a qualitative empirically based teacher research study that examines the ways in which African American students and all students perform expository writing tasks using an Ebonics-based Rhetoric and Composition focused first-year writing curriculum. As such, her work focuses on creating culturally relevant pedagogies and curricular design to support all students expository writing practices. She most recently co-edited *Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration: From the Margins to the Center*.

Staci, thank you so much for joining us.

SW: I want to start with Writing Program Administration, or WPA. What has been the most rewarding aspect for you as a WPA?

SPC: Probably, and this is going to sound cliché, but I'm going to unpack it a little bit. So when we think about higher ed administration, one of the big trendy things to talk about right now is student success, and often they define that in terms of retention and graduation metrics. So I'm going to start there, but I want to unpack it a little bit. Part of the reason for naming the student success is because it directly impacts students, and so one of the things I loved when I was a WPA was the fact that I could take on a quasi-leadership role and it'd have more of a direct impact to students. So I've been a Dean, I've been Associate Dean, right now enjoying being just faculty without having those responsibilities, but the one thing about WPA leadership is you get to work directly with students, with instructors teaching students, and you get to actually design the curriculum that students will use to impact students.

When you're at a department chair and Deans or Associate Deans level, the practices and policies you implement, sure they have impact on students, but it's not as direct and you're not necessarily designing pedagogy because you can't. You can't do it by yourself. I have worked in general education reform when I was a Dean and Associate Dean, and I worked on it collaboratively with instructors, but when you're a WPA, you're doing the designing, you're doing the assessment, and yes, it requires some collaboration, but it's directed by you. And so when you can implement specific pedagogy, specific assessment practices, and also retention initiatives, one of the things we can talk about is one of the English 1050-I retention initiatives that we implemented at WMU.

So when you can see the impact of that as far as students who would normally not come back to college, coming back another semester, then eventually graduating, that's when you actually get to see the fruits of your labor. So yes, that is what student success looks like. Even though it does seem cliché, we do need to talk about our success in relation to retaining students in higher ed, and also graduation, because if those things don't happen, then what are we doing? Why are we here? Why are we in higher ed?

One of the things I think in terms of our discipline is that we need to be more active with the fact that higher education needs us. They need us for students, they need WPAs, they need first-year writing, they need writing across the curriculum programs, they need writing centers, all those things impact student success so students can be retained. Because often what we find, particularly at WMU, if a student fails Calculus or Chemistry or maybe Psych 1000, they may come back a semester. If a student fails first-year writing, often they're less likely to come back at all.

So higher education needs us for retention, and if they don't come back, they don't graduate. Particularly when we think about writing across the curriculum and beyond first-year writing. For graduation, you have to complete often one or two writing courses to graduate, so they need us. So when we can see the impact of our students and how the work we do in our writing programs helps them meet their goal of graduation, that has to be the most rewarding thing I've seen as a WPA.

SW: What has been the most challenging aspect for you as a writing program administrator?

SPC: Well, one of the most challenging things about being at WPA is that if a department chair is like mid-level management, then the WPA in some ways depending on the institution, I know some have a little more autonomy than others, but it's often like you're managing the shift. And so when your shift manager, there are limits to what you can do in terms of your authority, particularly when holding folks accountable.

The other challenge was being a woman of color, people not respecting my authority. In part because they knew I couldn't remove anybody, I couldn't write anybody up. I could maybe reprimand someone in an email. But also being in the supervisory role but not being able to hold people accountable, compounding then on being a woman of color where folks are not used to seeing you in a supervisory role, and then compounding on the fact that being both a woman and a woman of color and the ways that the institution views WPAs, like not being compensated in the summer, for example. Being expected to have all these workload things and this invisible labor without any rewards or recognition.

Now interestingly after I stepped down as WPA, my predecessor is being compensated. And this is not just a Western thing. I've talked to many WPAs who are not...compensated or recognized for their labor. All of those things can be demoralizing.

I was fortunate to have a one-one teaching load, and I recognize a lot of WPAs don't have that, but the assumption that one-one teaching load is sufficient and sometimes folks would say, "Well of course, you got published, you're only teaching a one-one." And I would have to educate them

and say, "Actually on a two-two now, it's way less work." It's way less work to teach another course, especially if it's the same course and you're only doing one prep. But even if you're doing two preps, it's way less work than ... so the course release is just some of the equation, but not all of it. But the assumption that the course release, like I'm getting out of doing work was also very, very frustrating.

SW: Your teaching focuses on Afrocentric and language rights pedagogies. I was hoping you could talk about these approaches to teaching, and then how you incorporate them into writing program administration work?

SPC: Sure. So let me back up a decade, right? I mean, we're going to go back to 2010 when I was on the job market. I would say two thirds of the jobs that I was a finalist for when I was on the market were WPA jobs. Now one of the concerns was centered around this question, but it's centered around the assumption that you're going to teach black whatever. What are you going to teach to the rest of the students? So even some questions say, "Well, have you looked up our demographics? We're only 4% African American." And I'm thinking, "Well no shit, Sherlock." I mean, that's not going to change what I teach. So it was the assumption that well, if it's not a black school, then you have to adapt, and I was thinking, "Okay, you haven't read my work very well, because I've only worked at predominantly white institutions."

And so first, Afrocentric pedagogy and language rights is something that benefits all students, number one. Number two, the assumption that you have if I'm teaching Afrocentric pedagogy and language rights, I'm teaching nothing else and I'm teaching nothing that we would call mainstream, and that's not true either. You can also centralize Afrocentric pedagogy and language rights, and students acquire mainstream skills without that being the focus. Because one of the problems with mainstream is that it's white, it's dominant culture, it's middle-class, it's not inclusive of all traditions.

So, students come with quite a bit of knowledge about how mainstream English works already. It's not that we don't not teach it, it's that that is not the center of focus. And so, one of the things that I showed in my first book is how you take an Afrocentric curriculum as the focus, the readings are Afrocentric, the assignments are language rights inclusive so students can write whatever language rises they want, and some of them did, which I'll get to in a moment. So how you do that, and then you have these universal writing program learning outcomes.

I showed how you can do that and you can still meet these learning outcomes, because you're thinking about the framework and all the assessment gallery WPA work with the rhetorical knowledge, information literacy, all those concepts are so broad, right? Even language and conventions, it's so broad that you can focus on, you can pick whatever content you want and still accomplish those things.

So for me, dealing with those two forms of resistance, for me it became very quickly that this isn't about the fact that we're not teaching students how to write or that we're not teaching them how to use mainstream English and conventions, it's more about the fact that there's a discomfort when you take away mainstreamness as the content and you put content based around the community of a historically oppressed population.

SW: I'm curious as to what you were recommending or encouraging new teachers or new instructors to think about in order to embrace more equitable, inclusive, and accessible pedagogies and practices?

SPC: Recognize and empathize with what it feels for historically oppressed communities to have that discomfort by you feeling it yourself, because I think this world could use some empathy, particularly right now. I recognize every instructor is not going to have the same expertise in Afrocentric language and pedagogy that I have, but you can design very broad assignments like personal narrative, learning outcomes that I just spoke of that are really consistent, and then pick a content that revolves around historically oppressed populations to include.

Afrocentric is one center, but we don't have to just have one center. We can have multiple centers, right? The other thing is the materials you include, particularly being very, very deliberate about what you include in a custom textbook and what you don't. So having the widest range of diversity content from the widest range of historically oppressed communities, even if that makes the volume look a little more massive, it's fine. The point is that students want to see themselves included. So those are a couple of things.

The other thing is to speak to language rights is if I believe students have the right to their own language, then I believe students have the rights to their own language. So when I taught at State, I had a student who wrote a paper in Mandarin Chinese to see if I was legit, and so I found someone who knew Mandarin Chinese who could translate and I gave him feedback based on just rhetorical appeals, content. Then we had a conversation about consequences and how he knew it was cool to do in my class, but how he knew he may not be able to get away with that in another class. But that's what language rights is about. It's about being sophisticated enough to decide when you want to employ certain practices and when you want to not.

SW: Your co-edited collection Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration includes experiences with racism, institutional constraints and challenges WPAs of color face. You talk about the role of blackness as a cultural epistemological framework that influences your own work as a writing program administrator. What institutional policies have you seen, your institution or elsewhere, that have embraced blackness as a cultural epistemological framework?

SPC: The short answer is I don't know elsewhere, other than what I've seen in the book. I think that this is really where we need to start learning from HBCUs. The reason why I was so deliberate about putting them in the book is because even in our field, the HBCU narrative is that they're actually way more traditional and more skill drill than predominantly white institutions, and that they're a little more stricter with language conventions, and that is not necessarily the case. For every HBCU that you find where you have skill and drill, you can find a PWI that has a similarly backwards pedagogy, but often that was seen as the master narrative of HBCU experience, even in essays written in our field. So I really was intentional about including HBCUs where that is the right institution for them to do that, and what we can learn from them.

Particularly I've seen our English 1050-I model become a model for particularly ... I don't want to out the institutions, but I've seen other institutions inquire and start implementing that. It's not exclusively blackness, but again, this is intersectionality. There's that model, very, very impactful

on African American students. Why? Because that's the population that disproportionately gets placed in remedial basic writing courses or has the higher rates of WF, so those withdraw rates. So, those are the two pockets I see it working.

Now, as far as institutional policies, I haven't seen any, especially at Western, and part of the reason why is because institutions aren't ready to get real yet. They will say they have things, but they won't use those things to change systems. So they will post an article in their magazines or on their new sites about some sort of new initiative that's helping people of color. They'll have a few students of color, the face of something, some success stories. Particularly my institution's doing now where you just see every five minutes there's a success story, and now there's a African American student, but often it's response to systemic racism and criticism.

So you see these kind of surface, really superficial. They say, "Look, we celebrate diversity. We honor it." But I know you don't honor it and celebrate it because the system hasn't changed. So when you still have the lower graduation rates for African-American, or you still have few to no, you have zero African-American Deans or Provost, you have an institution that's got 20,000 students and you've got two black department chairs, so hardly any in leadership, then the system is not changing. So I can't lie and say I'm seeing policies that are embracing blackness as a cultural epistemological framework.

SW: So to sort of end where we began, we've been weaving in and out of the different layers of education, the institution, the program, the classroom, and I'm thinking back to your first answer accompanied by this last question about how the institution is supporting and embracing blackness as a cultural epistemological framework. You mentioned student success as the most rewarding aspect of WPA work. I think for many of us, as teacher, we would say that's also the most rewarding aspect of teaching writing is seeing students succeed. And later, you talked about specific pedagogies, Afrocentric pedagogies and language rights pedagogies that can help students succeed. I'm interested in what other practices or other readings you would suggest teachers consider or reconsider so that student success is one of our main aims in the writing classroom.

SPC: So, one of the things we have to do, we need to start reading pedagogy outside of our field. We need to start, for instance, reading carefully about retention scholarship, and reading about how students learn. This cognitive science behind learning, because often what we do is we teach content as experts because we're experts, but experts know what shortcuts to take because this comes naturally and quickly for them. So, we have to teach as if we're not experts. So, I think reading about that scholarship and looking at how learning happens. A lot of the work I did when I was Associate Director of our faculty development office was just around how students learn, and very universal. Because oftentimes faculty are like, "How do I teach my content?" Especially our STEM faculty. And I'm like, "No, how do you teach?" I think that's foundational. It's also foundational to retention.

We do one-on-one writing conferences, but we need to broaden the focus and purpose of that. Behind understanding how a student is feeling, being that first gatekeeper in case there's some sort of mental health or they're having some particular challenges so we can get them the resources that they need. So, we need to be more intuitive that way. Also, one of the cool things

that one of the coordinators of our English 1050-I started doing is she noticed when she met one-on-one with students, so way more one-on-one meetings getting those students so they know that you care. Because one of the things that African American students, especially myself entering a space where there aren't very many people looking like me, I want to know if you care. Right? I want to know if I'm invisible in the space or if you want to include me. I want to know that I am welcomed.

So that, you don't need writing pedagogy. I mean, you don't need any of that. A lot of retention scholarship does address that, but certainly, back to one of the things my coordinator did was she knows like when she met one-on-one with students that there's food insecurity. So we have a food pantry on campus that some students don't even have time in classes to go to, so she started keeping protein bars and granola bars and soup and snacks in her office, so sometimes students will just come by after the meeting or in between classes and so is there because they've recognized that she cared, and that went a long way.

So just being a little more observant and be in tuned with particular trends like mental health, student food insecurity. In addition to your student success initiatives that we need to take a more holistic approach, and not just be limited to the pedagogy that we get in our field, by looking at faculty development literature. So, centers for teaching learning. Also, there's a conference called the POD Network. It's a professional conference of organizational developers that usually happens every October, November. I would start by going to those conferences because they have their own publications.

Also, connecting more with your teaching and learning centers. The current project that I'm working on now is about how we bridge right across a curriculum and collaborate with our teaching and learning centers to foster more diversity inclusion initiatives. Right? So starting there, and even talking to your instructional designers about universal design, about being ADA compliant in the materials that you use. So, those sorts of things would be my start. Get to know your teaching and learning center. And talking about teaching across fields, across disciplines, and at a more institutional level than a programmatic or a department level I think definitely is the way to go, particularly with inclusion and inclusive practices. Because my Afrocentric pedagogy, it's in relation to language rights, but what again does black student success look like? Our field does not have those answers alone.

SW: Thank you, Staci, and thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.