

## Episode 84: Steph Ceraso

### *Transcript*

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

The purpose of *Pedagogue* is to promote diverse voices at various institutions and help foster community and collaboration among teachers of writing. Each episode is a conversation with a teacher or multiple teachers about their experiences teaching writing, their work, inspirations, assignments, assessments, successes, and challenges.

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In this episode, I talk with Steph Ceraso about sensory rhetorics and sound studies, multimodality and multimodal listening, and why sonic education matters in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Steph Ceraso is an associate professor of digital writing and rhetoric at the University of Virginia. Her 2018 book, *Sounding Composition: Multimodal Pedagogies for Embodied Listening* (U of Pittsburgh Press), proposes an expansive approach to teaching with sound in the composition classroom. Ceraso has published scholarship in journals such as *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *College English*, *Composition Studies*, *enculturation*, and *Peitho*. Her most recent project, *Sound Never Tasted So Good* (Intermezzo), explores the relationships among writing, sound, rhetoric, and food.

Steph, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: Your teaching and research interests include multimodality, digital rhetoric, sensory rhetorics, and sound studies. Can you talk about what your pedagogy looks like? What are some of your pedagogical values? What does it mean to take a sound studies approach to teaching writing?*

*SC: Sure, well, first of all thank you so much for having me. I like that you asked the question about the sound studies approach, and I first want to just say like, I'm a little hesitant to call it a sound studies approach to teaching writing. Because there's such a long history of scholarship on sound in rhetoric and composition, right? That predates the emergence of sound studies as a discipline. I want to make sure I'm giving that disciplinary history credit. I think what sound studies adds to my thinking about sound as a teacher is a focus on the body, the senses, on affect. So in my classes, students aren't just treating sound as an audible text or sonic content, but as this kind of holistic multisensory experience. So a big part of my pedagogy involves getting students to think about how their bodily experiences shape the ways they interact with and compose texts and different kinds of experiences of all kinds.*

I guess, pedagogically in terms of values, I would obviously value embodied experience and hands on learning activities and also experimentation. I love having students treat the act of composing as a kind of inquiry, right? Whether they're using text or audio or video...for me,

composition is always about the process. Having students learn what they think about something along the way as opposed to knowing what their project or argument is going to look like before they even start. For me, I love that the process of discovery in terms of composing whatever audio projects or video projects they're doing. So that's that really important thing for me is this idea of inquiry.

*SW: What kinds of activities or multimodal assignments and technologies do you use in the writing classroom? Maybe you could talk to me a little bit more about students' initial reactions to these multimodal assignments and then their reflections at the end of the semester or afterwards after they participated in this kind of multimodal composing process.*

SC: So let me break that question apart. So, the technology part, I'll start with that one. For technology I'm super DIY. I encourage students to use whatever technologies they have access to, to complete an assignment. I don't hold instructional classes where I walk them through how to use an audio or video editor, for instance. I do provide them with a lot of free resources and of course I'm there for additional help if they need it. But I first always ask them to try to figure things out on their own through tinkering and experimentation. So one little thing I do is I tend to do a lot of mini assignments to help them learn certain functions of a program. For example, if I want them to practice sound design or manipulating different kinds of sounds, I might ask them to record themselves cooking their favorite recipe.

And that might just be like microwaving ramen in their dorm, right? The goal is to get them to learn, to enhance the cooking sounds in an audio editor in ways that allow the listener to feel like they're going through that sensory experience with them. And so just little tiny activities like that along the way, rather than, "Here's a class about how to use Audacity," it's just an audio editor. I mean most students are very good at picking this stuff up on their own anyway. A lot of them are better than me at certain kinds of technologies. But I find that this approach is important because digital tools and platforms are always changing anyway. Right? It's more valuable for students to learn how to learn for themselves. How do you figure out a technology you've never used before?

That's the thing they're going to have to figure out their whole lives, right? Because technology is going to constantly change. I think it's better than sort of a simple step by step, here's how to use this technology to do that kind of figure it out, experiment with it, develop some habits and practices that help you learn new technologies on your own because this stuff might look totally different or might not even be available in a couple years. I think that's kind of a more valuable practice.

About the example assignment, there's so many, but I'll just talk about what I'm thinking about right now, which is, this fall I'm teaching a class at UVA called "Writing With Sound" where students collaboratively produce a multiple episode podcast. Sometimes it's on a topic they want to do, and other times it's like we have this opportunity this semester to do a podcast series on the new memorial to enslaved laborers at UVA. It's the first time we're all physically back on campus with this huge new memorial that's really significant. Students are going to be working on that.

I guess this example is typical of the kinds of assignments with audio that I do. I'll kind of walk you through a few things. Instead of just having them dive into research or audio production, I always spend the first few weeks of the class talking about listening and actually practicing listening with students. We take sound walks around campus and think about what stories the sounds are telling us about this place, or how they're making us feel. During listening exercises or experiences, I ask them to think about their identities and bodies, not just their sensory experiences, but how their race, gender, ethnicity, et cetera, might affect the ways that they're listening to other people's stories or how they interview people.

So really thinking about listening, not just in terms of what other people were saying or what sounds they're hearing and trying to make meaning of those sounds, but it's trying to cultivate a particular kind of attunement to the sonic world and learning to listen to other people beyond just hearing what they're saying. I think a lot of times there's a tendency when you teach an audio project, you just want to get to it. You want to get to the technology part, you want to get to creating this sonic project. But for me, those first few weeks are really an opportunity to get students to kind of question their own listening practices and to really become better listeners. It's not just something that we do on our own. It is a learned practice. I really try to emphasize that in any assignment that involves audio, especially.

So students sometimes initially react with a little bit of hesitancy or confusion. I signed up for a podcast class and now I'm walking around campus in a meditative state, right? What is going on? But afterwards I've had many students tell me how much more sensitive they are to the ways that sounds shape their experiences and their everyday lives to the ways that sonic rhetorics are working in the world. I think they're also more conscious of thinking about digital work, like a podcast as a multisensory experience, as opposed to just content. I think talking about the body and the senses in relation to digital production and multimodality helps students become more savvy designers and consumers of texts treating them as wholistic experiences or rather than just information, but also just more sensitive listeners in any situation. And I think that's a really valuable thing.

*SW: Steph, how did you get into this work? What led you to focus on sonic composing practices and having students record their cooking habits and having them walk around campus paying attention to sound? I imagine most people don't think of sonic rhetorics and sensory rhetorics when they think about teaching writing, or when they hear you say that you're a writing teacher.*

SC: Yeah, great question. I think it's hard to answer because I've always been sort of interested in sound and music since I was a little kid. The interest was already there. But when I started grad school at Pitt, multimodal and digital approaches just started gaining a lot of traction in the field at that moment. That was really exciting to me, but also sound studies as a discipline sort of exploded across the disciplines. It just happened to be the timing of these two things sort of made it possible to write a relevant dissertation about sound and listening. And the professors I worked with at Pitt encouraged me to experiment with sound in my research and teaching when it was not yet the norm in the field. I feel really grateful that I was in the right place at the right time when that sort of happened.

But I think what kept...I was interested in it and at Pitt, as a graduate student, I was able to teach and try out a few experiments with sound in the classroom...I just saw the kind of reactions from students, and these kinds of experiments were so meaningful and the work was so great and they were so interested. It just made me want to keep researching and sort of writing about this and figuring out what does a sound-based pedagogy look like? A lot of it, in many ways, my research is very much driven by my interactions with students and the classroom experiences I've had.

*SW: So you said you were really interested in music as a kid, and now I'm wondering if there was a moment in grad school that led you back to some memory as a kid listening to music, or was there an album or artist that sort of inspired you to bring sound and embodied listening into the classroom as a graduate student?*

SC: I don't think I can pinpoint an exact moment or experience when I was younger, but I was always around music. My parents were really big music fans, and so there was always music around. My brother's a musician. I was always interested in sort of just like listening and I love spending hours listening to albums, which doesn't really happen much anymore. I feel like that sort of sensitivity to music and I was a teenager in the 90s, right, where grunge...all the concerts and just the experiences of that era, I think made a huge mark on me. But in terms of the embodied stuff, I think the thing that really pushed me over the edge in graduate school was seeing the documentary *Touch the Sound* that features deaf percussionist, Evelyn Glennie.

As soon as I watched it and finished watching that, I knew I was going to write about it. Like immediately. I was like...it basically changed my entire trajectory in graduate school because I was going to do something with digital media and multimodality. I always liked sound stuff, but until I saw that early in my graduate career, it totally transformed everything that I thought about listening and made me just think about sound in an entirely different way. I knew that that was something, and I became sort of obsessed. Like Evelyn Glennie played in Pittsburgh and I tracked her down and got her to agree to an interview. I mean, it was an obsession for a while. I think that's sort of what drove the dissertation work and that eventually turned into the book. But yeah, I think it's hard to pinpoint a specific experience in youth, but I've always had, just been very interested in listening to music and just being a very sensitive listener I think in general and hearing other people's stories. So, it just made sense to sort of pursue this kind of work.

*SW: In your book, *Sounding Composition* (2018) and in a 2014 article you wrote called "(Re)Educating the Senses," you offer multimodal listening to "expand how we think about and practice listening as a situated, full-bodied act...[which] can help students develop a deeper understanding of how sound is manipulating their feelings or behaviors in different situations" (p. 103). Do you mind talking more about the affordances of centering multimodal listening in composition classes?*

SC: Definitely, so I've already kind of talked about how multimodal listening can help students design multimodal text or experiences that appeal to multiple senses. So for me, multimodal listening is really about kind of sensory education. I think in a way it helps students produce more immersive and compelling projects by really thinking about like, how is this not just the ideas, how is this whole text or experience going to engage in audience at the level of the body? That's on the one hand, on the other hand, I think that focusing on listening as a practice that

involves more than the ears or hearing makes students really conscious of accessibility from the get go. In my classes, students are asked to think about the various ways that audiences with a range of bodily or sensory capacities might engage with their work.

Like, for instance, the audio project assignment often includes, or always include transcripts that describe nondiscursive sound in vivid detail. That's a practice in itself that students have to get good at. And it's a writing practice that's involved. They also sometimes include images or video along with their podcasts. Things that you might see on a lot of professional podcasts...that have extras on their websites. That's just always included in the kind of audio storytelling that I have students doing because it allows different people to interact with their researcher's storytelling beyond hearing. So centering multimodal listening is essentially centering inclusivity and accessibility in composition courses to my mind.

*SW: Steph, this is my last question. In your introduction to Sounding Composition you talk about why sonic education matters. I thought we could end our conversation there. You mentioned the affordances of multimodal listening to rhetoric and composition and how this work complements some of our disciplinary values. What else does sonic education add to our understandings of teaching writing? And why does sonic education matter in our 21st century cultural and political moment?*

SC: Great questions. In terms of rhetoric and composition, what I think multimodal listening and sonic education, at least the kind that I'm talking about here contributes to ideas about multimodality more broadly, and how we think about it. There's already...we're already constantly expanding this idea of multimodality in the field. Jody Shipka's work and others...it's not just about the digital, but it's also not just about meaning making and just treating other kinds of modes, like audio or video, as another kind of text. So really moving beyond simply alphabet text and thinking about listening and multimodality more broadly in relation to the senses, "What does a more sensory, rich multimodal approach look like?" That's what I'm sort of after in all of my work.

In terms of, you know, why does sonic education matter in the 21st century? I talk about in the book strategically designed sound is showing up in more and more places. Right? Coffee shops, baseball stadiums, grocery stores, restaurants, museums, you could just go on and on. There's a lot of money and time being spent figuring out how to manipulate people with sound. So much of this is intended to manipulate our behaviors and experiences like making us want to buy more, move through a space in a certain way. So being more conscious of not only what sound means, but how it works and affects people in different contexts can make us more sensitive, critical listeners in just everyday life. I think that's a big part of education, even in rhetoric composition, when I do this work, students are always telling me about how they're using it in their everyday lives, which is sort of the ultimate goal.

But more importantly, I think sonic education and listening in particular is crucially important in our current cultural and political moment. Multimodal listening's emphasis on highly contextual embodied experiences, provides a kind of reflective approach to listening to and for difference. Whether that difference is race, gender, ability, sexuality, anything related to identity;

multimodal listening encourages us to pay attention, not just to what a person is saying, but to the person as a body in the world with particular perspectives and experiences.

I think, this sounds naive, but I think at its best listening can lead to genuine understanding and empathy, and these kinds of approaches. Again, it's not something that we talk about or learn in school very often. I think there's an opportunity for people who center sort of multimodal approaches to use listening as a way to cultivate this kind of attunement, not only to the sonic world, but just to listening in general to other people. There's already some amazing work on listening in the field like Krista Ratcliffe's "Rhetorical Listening." I hope this area continues to grow. I'd love to see more listening happening in our classrooms and research, especially in relation to cultural rhetorics. To me it feels like an urgent need both in the field and in the world we live in right now.

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