Episode 26: Tara Wood
Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Tara Wood about disability studies, ableism, crip time, and how to center disability studies in writing classrooms and programs. Tara Wood is an assistant professor of English and writing program administrator at the University of Northern Colorado where she teaches courses in rhetoric, composition, and pedagogy. Her research focuses on disability, accessibility, and inclusive writing pedagogies. She is the current co-chair of the Committee on Disability Issues in College Composition (NCTE/CCCC).

I want to start by reading a passage from Tara's 2017 article in *College Composition and Communication* titled, "Cripping Time in the College Composition Classroom." It's a phenomenal qualitative study on the experiences of students with disabilities in the writing classroom. Here's the passage:

> Most of the accommodations for disabled students in higher education are heavily tied to test taking: extended time on exams and reduced-distraction environments, for example. If not directly tied to test taking, common accommodations are designed for lecture-based classrooms: note-takers, carbon copy paper, and the like. In discussion- and process-based writing classrooms, most of these accessibility measures do not necessarily apply. (261)

In this article, Tara critiques normative conceptions of time and offers the concept of crip time. This episode involves conversations on ableism and normative concepts of time, as well as using crip time as an alternative pedagogical framework for the writing classroom.

Tara, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Let's start with a larger question before getting into crip time as an alternative pedagogical framework. How do you define ableism?

TW: I agree, that's a really, it's a big one, just like any of the big discriminatory -isms, but I think it's useful or has been useful for me in my own experience and in my own scholarship to think about it as sort of two pronged. It can either be social prejudice, attitudinal kind of prejudice aimed at people with various disabilities. And it can also be a discriminatory act, something that is done to in a discriminatory way people with various psychiatric, cognitive, mental, intellectual, physical disabilities. And the flip side of that or thinking about it in sort of inverted way is also that ableism is a sort of privileging of the able body or an attitude about the premises and ultimate "good" of the able bodied for all.

SW: What are some commonplace ableist assumptions about writing?

TW: Yeah, so I think the one that I've tackled the most in my own work is the idea that writing takes place in a normative time construct. The idea that people produce at certain intervals that are predictable and quote unquote normal. And that has a tendency to enable or foster ableist approaches to teaching, writing or thinking about writing because you make assumptions about what the brain not only does, but should do and what's expected and normal in terms of producing text. I think another ableist idea about writing is the labor involved, which of course is related to time, but it's the amount. Our assumptions or people's assumptions about the amount of labor that goes into the production of a text, for example. A really concrete example of this and of course, it's hard to think about anything except in the teaching of writing, but a concrete example is a student swaps a paper with another student. Very common practice in writing classrooms.

And one student says, "Oh, you must have just done this at the last minute, me too," when they look at another student's paper, because maybe it's not fully fleshed out. There's a lot of error that's visible to their partner. And when in reality it took that student hours and hours to produce that piece of content. This sort of, these assumptions that we have about what people can produce and how much labor it takes to produce whatever is being asked of them.

SW: So how do you deconstruct that normative concept of time?

TW: I think one of the biggest ways to try and deconstruct that, so, the idea of a commonplace is that it's common. It's so prevalent you don't notice it anymore. I think one very concrete way to try and address it, deconstruct it, is to just talk about it in a sustained way throughout your interactions with other people. Whether that's in a classroom or a workplace environment, to just be saying out loud, "This is going to take some people longer than others." Or if you ever have what people might call a free write or any kind of spontaneous writing activity to always say, "It's okay if you don't finish because people think at different paces and that's cool." It's just these sort of little subtle ways that in my own teaching practice, I just try to hit all the time as my own way of trying to combat these ideas about time and writing and normalcy.

SW: What are some commonplace ableist assumptions about teaching?

I think the biggest one in connecting teaching and disability is the idea that disability is something we should fix. That it's something we should try to address. It's something we should try to cure. It's something we should help this student get rid of or eradicate or help them get a little closer to the normal producing student. That's for me, that's the biggest one. It's the number one thing.

For example, I get a lot of people that want to talk to me at my own institution and other institutions about disability because of my work. And very, very common anecdote is always about a troublesome experience they've had with a disabled students. It's just anecdotal example of a student and how they can many times fix that student. And that sounds super critical. I have

been in that position myself to share an anecdote like that so I don't mean it as judgy as it might sound, but I do think it's because of that rooted commonplace. And often with good intentions, we want to be able to fix whatever the issue is. But if we start to connect disability with identity and we allow disability to be something that people can claim and something that people can claim with pride, then this disruption happens where all of the sudden we have to rethink, oh, well what does it mean if I'm attempting to fix this, if it's associated with their identity?

And of course, there are all sorts of intersectional parallels to that. If you think about something like African American students and Vershawn Ashanti Young's work on code meshing and all of these things, there's lots of parallels to how these commonplace assumptions can impact students in ways that diminish components of their identity. And I think in some ways, disability, it's an area that needs to be explored in that vein. What does it mean for us to think about a student with a disability claiming their disability identity in a writing classroom? And how does that play out in the writing itself? How do we grade it? How do we assess it? How do we teach to that? It's a really complicated, but super exciting and important topic for me.

SW: As mentioned earlier, you problematize normative conceptions of time and production in your article, "Cripping Time in the College Composition Classroom." You write about how when left unexamined these normative conceptions and assumptions privilege specific bodies. Do you mind talking more about the concept of crip time as an alternative pedagogical framework?

TW: I think we've touched on this a little bit, but crip time is a concept that has emerged from disability communities and has since been leveraged by disability theorists to challenge certain ableist ideologies in wide, wide range of disciplines. For me, I usually draw on Irving Zola's definition, which is a flexible approach to time. It seems really simple, but it's the idea that people will do things at different times, that people will approach a given task at different time intervals. It's just thinking about time in a nonlinear way. Yesterday when I was reading through your questions, I was like, oh, I'm going to come up with like a really good metaphor for crip time. And here's what I got. I even wrote this one down in preparing.

If normative time were like a thing, normative time would be like an uncooked spaghetti noodle. It's straight, it's firm, goes from one end to the other. And if crip time were a thing, it would be like a ball of yarn. Maybe we pull a little bit off. It's all loose. It's not never ending necessarily, but it's definitely not an uncooked spaghetti noodle. That's the metaphor you get. And I do think it gets to that idea of flexibility and even the rigidity of this idea of normative time. Which most people can't deal with, able or disabled.

There's this great piece. There's a collection about bipolar disorder. It's an edited collection about bipolar disorder edited by Horton. And there's a piece in there about labor and tenure clocks and the production, even now that graduate students are expected to do. And that everything has to happen on this completely unachievable and exhausting spaghetti noodle. It all has to happen like this and that if you can't meet it, what happens? It breaks something that gets disrupted. You

lose traction, whatever. Crip time for me is not only a concept, but it's also a sort of deliberate, theoretical acknowledgement that there are problems with normative constructions of time.

If you think back to my comment about the two students swapping papers, one hour of time might mean something really, really different for one person than for another so it gets a little bit complicated. How can you determine where that bar gets set if you're thinking about it in terms of minutes? Because one minute for one person is so different for another person and particularly for students with disabilities.

SW: Can you talk about other strategies and practices, like syllabus accessibility statements, that can center disability studies in the classroom?

TW: I can tell you right now I am, so I'm a writing program administrator at my university and my current work has been really trying to theorize access programmatically. I think we now have since '99, we've had this massive outpouring of a lot of incredible scholarship that's really focused on the teaching space and disability and access and inclusivity. We have a really robust body of scholarship at that nexus of disability studies in rhet/comp. But I feel like one thing that is, that needs more attention is how can WPAs and people that are administrating, think about access programmatically? And to give you a couple of concrete examples of how I'm starting to try and think about that. One is with deliberate professional development attending to disability and inclusivity in writing classrooms offered in the writing program, not from teaching and learning centers. Which are also super valuable, but I also think it's really important for us in writing studies to claim what does that mean in the context, the specific context of a writing classroom? To develop that.

Another example is mandatory reporting and title nine, which is a practice that has been challenged by the AAUP. The idea that if a student discloses anything to us, we are mandated by the university to report that according to title nine. And disability theory can really offer a critical lens to that. The idea that that student's story is no longer their own, their disclosure becomes my story to then report. Those are just a couple of little examples of how I think one of the ways forward for that nexus of disability studies rhet/comp is to add on the programmatic thinking to the classroom thinking. How can we think, stretch it out even bigger? And of course there are all sorts of ways to do that through curriculum. Drawing on the body of scholarship, that's theorized accessible writing pedagogies.

SW: What work has influenced your own ideas and understandings of disability studies in the writing classroom or program, maybe some resources or materials you would recommend to others?

TW: Certainly Dolmage's work has probably been more influential on not only my scholarship, but my teaching practice. Particularly his book, *Disability Rhetoric*. That was published right after I finished my dissertation study. It was just a profound, it had a profound effect on me to really understand the generative potential of disability. Was a massive shift. And this is for me,

this was after thinking and writing about disability for many years. And then when I encountered that book, I felt like it was really a turning point for me, where I felt like that even the word generative. This can be this, positive isn't the right word. But generative, I feel like is better. And that's Dolmage's word. That was a big, important moment for my scholarship.

And a quick example of how that impacted me is my dissertation study I had interviewed 35 students with disabilities and asked them about their experiences with access in writing classrooms. And in the study's original design, I was hoping to rethink accommodations. How can we better craft more appropriate accommodations in the classroom? But I was, I finished up collecting all these interviews. I was in the transcription stage where I'm typing all this stuff up and I was reading *Disability Rhetoric*. And I was like, oh my God, I've done this all wrong. I've not, I'm trying to, I'm in the fix-it mode. I was like, how can I make this better? How can I fix this stuff going on in writing classrooms? When I encountered his book, it really shifted to, oh, I should be thinking about what we're doing wrong. What do we need to change? That's how this needs to shift. It was a really fundamental piece for me.

The second one I'll just mention quickly is Melanie Yergeau's recent book, *Authoring Autism*. Oh my gosh. If there's any way you can give this a plug in your, it's such an amazing book. You'll read it so many times because it's so richly layered. And in terms of future directions, I also think that's her work is such a fantastic example of how disability will force a shift, a fundamental shift in how we think about rhetoric.

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