Episode 101: Timothy Oleksiak
Pedagogue podcast
Transcript

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

In this episode, Timothy Oleksiak talks about the purposes of peer review, feminist rhetorics, slow peer review, queer theory and rhetorical listening, and openness in rhetoric and composition.

Timothy Oleksiak is an Assistant Professor of English and the Professional and New Media Writing program director at the University of Massachusetts Boston. His work has appeared in *Peitho*, *Composition Studies*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Pre/Text*, and in edited collections. He is an enthusiastic lover of the composer Philip Glass and his given, chosen, and emerging families.

Timothy, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Let's talk about your recent article in Pedagogy called "Slow Peer Review in the Writing Classroom." It coins the term "slow peer review" as a means to "help students perform feminist rhetorical strategies that counter the power differentials and accountability-avoiding tendencies of those who reject information outright as fake news" (369). What would you say is the purpose of peer review? And what is slow peer review? And how does feminist rhetorics inform how you frame and use peer review in your writing classes?

TO: Well, thank you for having me. It's a delight and this is such a good question. When I think about the scholarly conversation regarding peer review, there are lots of different purposes for this particular activity in the classroom. So one of those, and I'll just list a few because I think it's helpful to ground us. So one is to help students revise and fine-tune what's already there on the draft. This can be a part of helping students to improve their writing so it aligns more with assignment description and goals. One purpose of student-to-student peer review is to offer students an audience to really make concrete that you're writing for someone else. And so the reviewer's response kind of functions as a stand-in for an often abstract notion of audience. The third purpose, or a third purpose is to open up students to other possibilities for their writing. And, finally, another purpose that you'll see floating around is to create structures of accountability.

Personally, these last two have become very important to my thinking about peer review. I suggest that peer review can be a world-making activity, and that peer review creates structures, or networks, or pathways for enacting accountability. The previous two, the other ones helping students to revise and creating opportunities for another kind of audience are less interesting to me for reasons that we could talk about further, but when I think about peer review as a feminist practice now this happens when I bring elements, and ideas of rhetorical listening into the peer

review context. So there's a direct application of Krista Ratcliffe's powerful feminist rhetorical frame in peer review.

Slow peer review, the thing that I'm kind of working on developing as a scholar as my personal kind of academic obsession, slow peer review functions as a feminist rhetorical practice then to the extent that it grounds the moves of rhetorical listening. It might be said that slow peer review is an additional strategy for rhetorical listening within the peer review context, but I don't want to push too far on that because it's not simply a one-to-one, or an uncritical application of Ratcliffe's work to peer review. The context actually shifts how we think about the moves that she lays out.

What's a bit more oblique is how slow peer review might help writing teachers develop responses to fake news. So shifting slightly over to fake news, I talk about it as a form of weaponized communication. It is deliberately false and it's used to create harm. It causes harm in lots of different ways that are very complicated. It hurts feelings. It creates false things that happen around us. It makes deliberation very difficult. We can and we should develop approaches to confronting fake news directly, but I think the least effective of these is labeling information fake news. So a lot of times we'll get into fact-checking, and things like that.

Those are necessary, but insufficient. We can't end at debunking fake news like, "Oh, this is really wrong." Because that doesn't take care of the rhetorical aspects of fake news. Fake news is a rhetorical commonplace and it activates factionalized thinking, or demagogic thinking. So as a scholar of listening as a rhetorical act, I want to think about fake news from that vantage point from the rhetorical vantage point, what communities are created through the deployment of fake news, what harms are created through the circulation of fake news, and by labeling something fake news.

I think about what listening can offer to us as a response to the phenomenon of fake news, the rhetorical act of creating, labeling, discussing fake news. And so to bring this all back to peer review, I try to make the case that the intimate relationships that form during slow peer review process can foster the kinds of relationships that might help us respond to fake news in this rhetorical dimension. So put slightly differently and make the case that a valid way to respond to fake news is by bringing it back to healing the damage fake news causes to relationships. And I think slow peer review can foster that kind of healing. It can give us a different way to respond other than process a fact-checking, debunking kind of logos-driven, rationale-driven kind of approach.

SW: Timothy, what do you think are some of the most significant challenges to peer review? And how does slow peer review help writing teachers better address those challenges?

TO: This is such a phenomenal set of questions. I'm so excited about these things because I think about them a lot. Now part of the trickiness in the first question is what are the challenges for writing teachers, or what are the challenges students face when conducting peer review? So I'll give some brief responses to both of those. And because when it's a student concern, or when it's

a student challenge, it ultimately becomes a teacher challenge, right? And so how do we respond to student challenges as writing teachers? So students don't prepare for peer review. Students haven't completed their drafts. Students get to a quick surface approach to a draft and then sit, and they talk about other things. You just do peer review once and you'll know that there are people who are like, "Okay, here, here, here. Now let's talk about what you did over the weekend." So keeping students focused. Student's attention wanders. Notice the two differences there. Keeping students focused versus student's attention wanders there's a joint responsibility to kind of stay on task.

It's not fun. It's not useful for students. There's a lot in the scholarship that suggests that students don't feel confident enough to critique someone else's work. They're still learning. They're stuck in a learner orientation and learners don't critique other learners. I think that's a very kind and benevolent kind of way to think through. I don't want to critique you because I don't know how, or I don't want to critique you because the nature of drafts is implicitly understood as in process. So students might not understand that responding to drafts is a developmental process. They may be coming at it from a critique which could close down learning, right? Close down a desire to be open to possibilities that a reviewer may say or may offer.

I think from a teacher perspective some of the challenges with peer review is creating a structure that allows a student to give rich feedback to their peer. And so a lot of times you'll get worksheets. Underline the thesis. Is the thesis clear? Peter Elbow talks about movies in my mind, which is a really great thing if as a reviewer you can just articulate the movie in your mind that is created when you read the draft then there's some really good information there. I appreciate that metaphor in a lot of ways, but how do we get students to provide rich feedback? Personally, I think one of the biggest challenges of peer review thinking is that it gets stuck in improvement logics. That the purpose of peer review is to improve either the draft itself, or to align the assignment more closely with, or the draft more closely with an assignment. Improvement approaches often rely on logics of control and mastery and trying to shape a piece of writing in a way that is limited.

I feel like I'm bouncing around a little bit, but these are some of the challenges floating around in my brain regarding peer review. They're real challenges. And they're earnest and we have to take them seriously. We have to treat them with kindness. These aren't deficiencies. It's a part of our thinking about what peer review can and should do. And it's part of the history students bring with them into our classrooms regarding peer review. So let's be kind and loving about these challenges, but then let's also use the kind of resources as we have as rhetoric and composition theorists to kind of think differently about it.

So what does slow peer review do? And how does slow peer review maybe respond to some of the challenges that have articulated for students and teachers when it comes to peer review? Peer review, no matter what the form needs to be taught. It has taught or else it doesn't do well. That's commonplace in peer review scholarship. I believe that slow peer review additionally requires a rethinking of the kinds of things that get taught in the writing classroom too. There are some

intellectual lifts that are made easier when we have conversations about content that makes slow peer review just an easier thing.

So, for example, when we teach about listening as a rhetorical act, or when we have conversations well before slow peer review about world-building what that's like, what does it mean, what's its relationship to composing, how do texts create worlds? Having those kind of conversations make slow peer review an easier lift for students. And these things don't have to be super lesson planning. You can, as a teacher, have an easy chat about who is present in a text, who is ignored, who is treated with too much ease in a text, who needs to be more complicated, not stereotyping, but you just generalized about this group of people.

Who is enabled or disabled by the text itself? So I outlined the specific steps of slow peer review twice: one in the article you mentioned, "Slow Peer Review in the Writing Classroom;" and the other, I articulate the actual steps of the process is in the *CCC* article, *Queer Praxis for Peer Review*. I don't want to say too much about the actual steps, but that practice for peer review is an open access CCC article, so you could go on the website. I really am grateful for Malea Powell and her team for making that open access. So you could access the steps to it pretty quickly. I'd like to articulate though what students actually write during the slow peer review process and why those four texts are really important for kind of responding to the challenges that I articulated.

So what are these four texts? One is a complete draft. It doesn't matter. It could be a literature review. It could be an annotated bibliography. The genre of the draft is ancillary to really being able to explore slow peer review, or engage in it. So a complete draft. This isn't what Anne Lamott calls a "shitty first draft," or just kind of a sketch of an idea. This has to be an earnest attempt at fulfilling every element of the assignment. Second text that students create is what I'm calling a thick description. Now, before we get to the thick description, I literally spend a 50 minute class having students read and read and reread their peer's drafts. It's a really remarkable experience in the classroom to be totally silent. Everyone is at their computer screens, or on their laptops. The only sound you hear is the people shifting and the scrolling back through. And so students read over and over. This is the slow part of it.

And I take that from Krista Ratcliffe's notion that we need to allow discourses to wash over us. So slowing down, rereading, constantly rereading the draft. I don't even give direction at this point. I just say, "For 30 minutes, or until you hear my alarm go off keep reading. When you get to the end start again." Now, a couple of things happen here. Students start to just get through it really quickly the first time. And then they're like, "Okay, what do I do for the next 40 minutes?" So I'm very engaged and I'm very watchful of students. And I'll say, "Slow down, start again. I notice you're wandering. Stick with it. Trust the process of reading."

Then, finally, at one read, they're going to have to a few prompts. They're going to have to answer a few questions. One is what's the world that's being built in the draft? What is its relationship to existing institutions of power? And importantly for me is who can survive, and

who can thrive in the world of the draft? Now I've never asked that to students before I started thinking through peer review like this, but it's not where's the thesis? It's not how can you make the argument stronger? It's here's a world that you're offering us. Who can have a time living in this? Whose life is made more difficult by the world you've just created in this draft? So that's kind of an abstract let me think about this.

Then the next set of questions is would you live in this world? Do you have an easy time participating in the world created? What ways would just be difficult for you to participate in? What are the structures or barriers? And it could be apathy. I don't want to talk about plastics in the ocean because I don't care about that, right? And then the kicker for me is what would happen if the author doesn't account for the things you've said previously? So you're asking right away for reviewers to think about what happens if the author doesn't take their ideas seriously. And there's some really rich, interesting answers to that question that happens.

So you set this thick description over to hand it back to the author. And usually for homework between a Tuesday, Thursday, or between Monday's class and Wednesday's class, the author will write a response. So the author is not asked to revise their work in any specific way. The author just has to spend 24 hours. You could even extend it to 48 hours of really just considering what the thick description is telling them about their own writing. Give students space and time to ask those questions to really think about it. This is the accountability measure that feels so important to me.

If you don't account for what the reviewer said in their thick description, you haven't engaged as a responsible human being. You haven't really considered the relationship that someone spent time with your work. So I really try to build up a mechanism through the author response to get students to read the feedback, to process the feedback as an author. And so there's no control over this in terms of the content, in terms of what specifically students have to say or write, but there are these really challenging human directives that I want them to consider in writing the thick description, and the author response become these ways of understanding the effects of texts in material ways I believe.

Finally, there's the fourth bit of writing is the reflection cool down. And this is more for me to see if what students are picking up is what I'm encouraging them to pick up. So I'll ask questions about what did you think of this process? How does this process relate to other forms of peer review? What did you hate about it? What did you really enjoy about it? Things like that. That's kind of like my assessment. It's not the strongest assessment, but it's kind of something that I need as an instructor to see if my vision of it and their vision of it align. Does that make sense?

So these are the four major components and some of the ways in which I try to build an accountability, or provide writers the resources necessary for deep reconsideration of the way their drafts are operating. And I don't make any dictates about what they need to do to revise. I literally say, "Now go revise. Go do your thing." That's what writers do. They hear, they solicit feedback, they get feedback, and now they have to make choices.

SW: Your teaching and research interests also focus on queer theory and rhetorical listening. How do you center queer rhetoric in the teaching of writing and even maybe, your understanding of the field of rhetoric and composition?

TO: I'm trying to work through and think through the relationship between queer theory and rhetorical listening because those theories have kind of saved my life as a human being, and as a scholar, and a rhetoric and composition specialist. I teach frequently bell hooks great essay "Theory as Liberatory Practice." I became queer because I read queer scholarship and I completely did a 180 on my dissertation project when I read "Rhetorical Listening." These things are in me as a human being and have shaped and changed who I am. My work is trying to think about what queer rhetorical listening might mean and how that plays out in the teaching that I do, and how it plays out in the thinking that I do as a writing instructor as a writer myself.

So I'll talk a little bit about how I'm thinking through queer rhetorical listening. I suggest that there are two approaches to queer and rhetorical listening. The first is to queer rhetorical listening proper. So you take queer theory and you just see how it changes, or helps us think through rhetorical listening. I try to create a space for myself and our colleagues to do that in the *Peitho* cluster conversation on queer and rhetorical listening. It's a matter of bringing queer thought into scholarship on listening to create simply more. What is more? It's not to tear down or destroy rhetorical listening for its lack of consideration of queer thought that's an ungenerous and unfair approach to Kris' work, or the ideas that have developed out of Kris' work, but it's what more can we think through? I think the easiest way to queer rhetorical listening is to take queer concept and then read "Rhetorical Listening" through that.

But there's also this other thing that I think is really important for us to think through as a field. I think rhetoric and compositionists can and should focus more on how queer people, or queer communities listen rhetorically. So to my mind, in order to do this work we have to think of rhetorical listening a demonstration of transformation. And that's where the writing happens. That's where the composing happens. How do we compose in a way that's not I want to change your mind, but a demonstration of our own transformation in light of the discourses that are coming at us? How do we ask not just for change, but how do queer people and queer communities illustrate the ways others have changed them? And we can think carefully about what queer transformation looks like, and the ways in which we can responsibly be transformed by ourselves, or by others, right?

So for me, it's not about who speaks first. This is really important. There are some critiques of when someone writes a text and another person comes at it there's the sense that the writer is in service of the person who's using the text. And I want us to get away from that. It's not who speaks or write first. That puts also an undue burden on minoritized groups to create a text for a majoritarian group. If a text is there, it's there. To assume that it's for me, though, that Gloria Anzaldúa wrote about Nepantla, or borderlands. For me, as a white cisgender person it is kind of arrogant and violent. She's not writing for me. bell hooks is not writing for me, but I love their

ideas and want to responsibly integrate and show how their powerful ideas have changed my approach to rhetoric in composition.

Joshua Barsczewski has this great piece in *Peitho* about not writing about things. There's some things where you're just like, "No." I've wanted to write about Sylvia Rivera for many, many years now, but I can't find an ethical in as a cisgender man to write about a transwoman of profound importance. I want to suggest that there's responsible ways of writing about and responding to things, and we need to think carefully about what that responsibility looks like. And when we do, though, take a chance on showing how a scholar has transformed us and how we've changed we're probably going to get it wrong even in print, but I think we could consider things. I think we could be careful with things, but I've been thinking a great deal about the presumption of openness in rhetoric and composition.

So openness is enshrined in the habits of mind that is, and so it has a particular value in rhetoric and composition. Without a disposition to openness the rhetorical project fails. It just can't happen. And we see this everywhere. We try to convince someone of something, and are having a difficult time with it. Way back in the '70s Wayne Booth has done some interesting work on this by flipping the persuasive aim for how do I persuade you to when should I change my mind? Openness is also central to rhetorical listening, but when folks are deeply committed to their cultural logics, and the meanings they've created around tropes, then accusations of closedness become like speakers caught in that feedback loop. And the squeal sound shuts everything down, or it literally ruins the system. So rather than try to think through whether we should be open or not, I'm increasingly interested in composing in a way that demonstrates change in the presence of what others offer.

And so I really want my writing classes to move to that demonstration of change. What does it look like to compose as a writer in the process of changing, or in the process of being different? How do we recognize and compose an open text? How can we look as readers at a text and go, "Yeah, yeah. That's an open text. Yeah, yeah. That's a text where the author has demonstrated a transformation." I'm not entirely sure how this all looks, but I like to try. In my classes I like to experiment with offering questions like how do you demonstrate that you've transformed in the writing that you're doing? Then seeing what students can really do. So I'm perhaps obsessed with this openness, this notion of openness it's another obsession of mine in part because I have a really campy relationship to the word queer, and campy relationship is like I hold very tightly in almost a comedic effect to that notion of queer.

My understanding of queer is not a stand-in for LGBTQA+. It's not a synonym, even though it's treated as a synonym in a lot of composition scholarship. You can't just queer as a stand-in for gay, lesbian, trans, bisexual, queer, questioning, allied a romantic. Queer is strange. Whether it's a verb or a noun in epistemology, or ontology it's just strangeness. It's what are the ways that we can make text the relationships they engender and the theories we create about these things strange for others? And what might that strangeness illustrate for us about writing and composing?

The notion of openness, the notion of demonstration of change is a strange writing practice. It's counterintuitive almost when it comes to writing, but I try to take these occupations about queerness and openness and shift the kinds of questions I ask my students to write about, the kind of questions that students consider as they compose. And you could see this kind of insistence on openness, this resistance to assess and be judgmental throughout slow peer review, too. I'm looking for more and greater ways to keep ourselves open in ways that are accountable for communities that we engage with whether intentionally, or accidentally.

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