

Episode 142: Travis Webster

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Travis Webster talks about his book on LGBTQA writing center directors, advocacy, anti-racism, writing across the curriculum, and mentoring tutors.

Travis Webster is an Assistant Professor of Writing and Rhetoric and the Director of Writing across the curriculum at Virginia Tech University. He has also worked in and with writing center since 2002. He's the author of *Queerly Centered: LGBTQA Writing Center Directors Navigate the Workplace*, which won the International Writing Centers Association's 2022 Outstanding Book Award and the Conference on College Composition and Communication's 2023 Lavender Rhetorics Book Award for Excellence in Queer Scholarship. His articles and chapters appear in *College Composition and Communication*, *Writing Center Journal*, *The Peer Review*, *WPA*, *Writing Program Administration*, and edited collections.

Travis, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: Your book, *Queerly Centered*, recently won the 2023 CCCC's Lavender Rhetorics Award for Excellence in Queer Scholarship, and also won the 2022 Outstanding Book Award for the International Writing Centers Association. What led you to this research and can you provide a brief synopsis of *Queerly Centered*?*

TW: Sure. Thank you again, Shane, for having me. I'm delighted to be talking to you today. I respect your work so much and this podcast as well, and so it just feels like a real dream to be interviewed and have the chance to talk to you and to colleagues in the field. First, thanks. What led me in the direction of the book. I started the book with the 2016 Pulse event, where a gunman walked into the Pulse gay nightclub in Orlando and opened fire. This has had a lasting impact even some nearly seven years later on queer people, queer communities. I obviously was really deeply impacted by this, not personally, but just emotionally. One of my book participants, actually several of my book participants, brought up the events so much so that I thought it should probably... The story that opens the book should be in there and should be part of the discussion, but one participant in particular said queer people always remember where they were when this took place.

It was just one of those national events that was a tragedy and that also just had a lasting impact on people of all orientations. But I noticed in the writing center community that a good number of people were doing things in their center that didn't have anything to do per se with writing center work or research, but that was community outreach and space holding for queer and non-queer folks of their universities who were impacted either directly. One of my participants was a Orlando writing center director at the time. At first, he said, as a white person, he didn't necessarily feel like it was... He's a white queer man, didn't feel like it was his tragedy per se, but a number of his consultants were directly impacted. Either new people knew or knew of people who had passed on from the murders. It was an odd year as well. 2016 was a... We didn't know it

was coming in the fall per se, but there was just a lot of political energy around that year that I think was intense, and violent, and had a deep affective impact. I just noticed that surfacing in the writing center community in ways where people were using their centers for good work. That was one part. Another was I had some early conversations with Harry Denny, who's just a fantastic queer writing center scholar who'd encouraged... From a conversation with some other folks at a writing center conference, this was the 2015 International Writing Centers Association Conference, really encouraged us to think about some of the research questions that eventually surfaced in my book.

What does it mean to be a queer identified writing center director alongside national landscapes that are in some ways progressive and other ways regressive? That question stuck with me for a long time. After I wrote the book, something that's not in it, I realized that I'd been grappling with some of these questions for the better part of 20 years. I had started work as a writing center tutor in undergraduate, so around 2002. This has been a long time ago. I went to undergrad in East Texas. I noticed in ways that I made myself available to writers who visited the writing center, helping them, something as simple as just being a gentle, good listener, and also sometimes being out and queer, or helping people navigate, for example, narrative in their first year writing assignment, that I was often a consultant that was sought out, not necessarily because of aptitude or anything like that, but more just like, "Oh, here's this soft queer guy who can help me out." I noticed that my work looked and felt a little different. I couldn't, at the time, put any words around that. It was gratifying. It was also effectively impactful. People would share stories with me, that, "Oh, hey. Do you think I can tell this story as the opening of my first year essay? It's raw and it's emotional. Can you help me through it?" and sitting in a writing center session.

I think, much later, I was actually able to realize this research question had been with me for a really long time. The general research question in my whole book is just what does writing center work look like in the day to day and its disciplinary implications for queer people leading them. I was really inspired by the work of Nikki Caswell, Jackie Grutsch McKinney, and Becky Jackson's *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors* that had come out out in 2016 and won a number of awards. It's a really fabulous case study-based book. I was also really inspired by Harry Denny and Anne Geller's *Writing Center Journal* article that drew from their 2005 interviews with folks who attended the Summer Institute, also looking at their labor, those participants' labor and the disciplinary implications of that. My participant responses were broken down into their history as queer people, so how their history as queer people impacted the kind of work they did.

Some of the work they did often rubbed up against activism or advocacy, and that's another chapter of the book, and their queer embodied administrative identities often led to tensions, and not always good or bad tensions. Some of them are good and bad, but just transpire alongside their work as directors. That's a breakdown of the research question in the chapters.

SW: You interviewed 20 writing center directors who identify as gay, lesbian, transgender, and queer across intersections of race, class, gender, and background. In chapter five, you write about Queer Writing Center Labor and Tension. I'm wondering if you could talk more about

some of the tensions and the different layers of tension that arise for queer writing center directors.

TW: Thanks, Shane. Yeah. It's interesting, my original interview question set didn't really have much about that kind of... They were super open-ended questions. I expected people to talk more about, say, the kind of activism work they did. A good number of people obviously did. There's a whole chapter on that, and that came up a lot in coding data and that sort of stuff. But yeah, I think there was a spectrum of experiences represented with what I call tensions. The book breaks this down in a lot of ways. I talk about, in some ways, the nationals the light guys took the time of the interviews, it was 2016 through 2018, and so there was just a lot happening nationally. The Pulse shooting obviously, but Trump rallies came into effect at that point. For example, one writing center director is campus visiting with a queer-centered job talk that's distributed to a large group of people at the institution it's advertised.

At the same time, there's a Trump rally and a student disappearance or something like that, some pretty heavy things happening. This person saying, "I have to go give this job talk on looking at the link between writing center research and queer theory," and being... His safety is something that's on his mind and is the job that he eventually he gets and he takes. But that kind of affective haunting of that initial experience really impacts the whole experience of the job talk, the job, interview, everything, and is first year. It isn't at a place that's somewhere traditionally understood to be superconservative. It's in this very northern queer liberal town with a thriving queer community. It kind of exists out of... I'm from the south. I'm from Texas. There's a lot of things happening in Texas that aren't great, obviously across the boards for queer and trans people, people of color. We might expect that the narrative is, "Oh, well, bad things happen in the south," but that event doesn't take place there.

It's taking place somewhere, in a place we might expect something like that wouldn't happen, or would happen in more implicit ways. That's obviously a moment of tension. There were these explicit moments, things like that. Also, that's a really... I break it down in the book between implicit and explicit, so if you participants are called names, called homophobic or transphobic names either in open or behind closed doors kind of ways. I obviously sought permission and had long conversations with some of the participants about bringing those into the book. Everyone has a pseudonym, and so privacy is of utmost importance. But I did think that those were important things to showcase and that that's, at the time, 2016, 2018. Even now in 2023, that's still potentially part of the work landscape for people of difference, whether queer identity, multi-marginalized identities, people of color. I thought it was important to bring that into the book even though it was difficult, in some ways, to write up or for a frame or to think about. Not everything in that chapter is rosy.

I think there's some really, really positive uplifting parts of the book that speak to participants talking about really beautiful, wonderful things that they do in their centers. That chapter does not have that, but I think that it was necessary to say and to make sure that that's out there. That in 2023 or in 2016, 2018, when I was talking to folks, that these things were still part of the landscape. Were they fewer and further between? Certainly. There was another director who told me that she has close relationships with conservative folks at her institution and that they support her, but then inside conversations, she would hear them, for example, supporting politicians who

avored anti-gay legislation or something like that. She talks then about the tension she has around that. On one hand, you have a good colleague who seemingly cares about you and that you have a good relationship with, but then you hear these other implicit, under the surface, under life things, that then make her feel like, well, crap. Am I just somebody's gay best friend at work kind of thing.

They actually are voting against me in their outside of work life kind of thing. Yeah. I think some lower key things, but no less salient. I'm thinking of a participant who told me that he's in a department that's very service heavy and he is gay, single, with no children. The assumptions some of his colleagues would make about his free time and his ability to take on committee work and things like that impacting his lived experience. The idea that he is seemingly more available for certain kinds of work that, say, straight parents aren't. "Oh, I have kids, so I can't do this," and him being kind of strapped with a lot of extra work at times. I mean, that's been talked about in many ways by women of color for 40, 50 years in sociological research and also in [inaudible 00:16:08] of more recent work. But yeah, some of these were definitely tensions that arose. I mean, not all of them look like violence, like some of the story's note, but it has a micro to macro range of experiences with that.

SW: What do you think advocacy and support looks like in the context of writing centers from colleagues and faculty across campus?

TW: Yeah. I mean, I don't know. I say this in the book, I don't know that it's that. I'm thinking of one participant who tells me that she's... Especially, her office door is always open for her consultants. She identifies as pan queer and also just is very open about her mental health status, how she's feeling and her bipolar identity, and that this immediately makes her more available to students in that she is very affectively raw about her identity, and that it helps students navigate their own identities, and that this is both something beautiful and something also occasionally very taxing. She said, "I'm always going to uphold this approach to my consultants and supporting students that are in the center and things like that, but that I sometimes just have to close my door or go home after a while. I have to create space or I'm going to deplete myself and I won't be as effectively available for these consultants if I'm not mindful." I think that points us in a lot of ways to some of the work, the research the last, say, 10 to 15 years in writing centers that really advocates for writing center directors to not just wear all the administrative hats of, say, the leadership, scheduling, professional development, day-to-day labor, the putting out fires, the things that we all do as administrators, but that there's also this valuing of advocacy and activism that's a double-edged sword. Should we be doing this work through our centers? I think yes. Should we also be mindful of how it impacts us? In particular, how it impacts our gay, lesbian, queer, trans identifying directors whose identities are not out there? Just being who we are in a leadership position in our center will signal us to particular kinds of research potentially. How does this rub up against this very heavy push in the writing center world that our sites have to be or ought to be activist ones? I don't know that there's a good answer for this. I think if you're thinking about amplification advocacy and support, I think it's just...

In some ways, seeing that this kind of work happens at all, that it impacts marginalized and multiply marginalized directors differently, I think just having that conversation is critical. I am thinking about things like our summer institutes for writing centers, and for writing across the

curriculum, and through our organizations. I wonder if the kinds of conversations that arise in research were actually on the ground in those summer institutes, what that could look like if we were... Because I feel like we publish about this. We might talk about it in lore, we might talk about it on listserv, but are there actually resources for helping people of queer identity or helping people who are multiply marginalized or marginalized and in leadership positions, are there actual resources for this?

Is it linked to, say, funding? I mean, I'm just thinking too about how the International Writing Centers Association, and Cs, and things like that have fellowships scholarships. I just think more around that, because I do think the work is slightly different for a lot of different people in the discipline, and how we might then help them get more research out, or have more specific conversations around this through national venues.

SW: Travis, you co-wrote an article in 2021 titled "Anti-Racism Across the Curriculum: Practicing an Integrated Approach to WAC and Writing Center Faculty Development" in WPA. Can you talk about this article and anti-racist-focused faculty development practices?

TW: Yeah. I wrote that piece with Dr. Rebecca Hallman Martini at University of Georgia. We wrote this to white people, in a lot of ways, writing to other white people while making sure to cite and really center the voices of folks like Dr. April Baker-Bell and her work on linguistic justice. We are certainly not the first to say this, but that faculty development, a lot of times, regardless of the topic in universities, is often situated around a one-time workshop. We were really trying to get at the idea of what this kind of work can look like when it's more integrated into a particular WAC or writing center curriculum. The barrier to anti-racism in any university I think is the university itself, because I don't believe that universities are inherently anti-racist. I think that's always going to be the trouble in that. Even some two or three years after we've written this, I struggle a lot with how to make this kind of work happen.

If it's especially in the context of WAC and writing center work, probably even more so WAC work, because WAC work faces similar systemic challenges. WAC, you can have a WAC workshop, for example, but if your entire institution is not really focused on building a culture of writing across the curriculum or of communities, it's just a drop in the bucket. I actually think WAC, as university missions, WAC and anti-racist work are very challenging, because like I said, if you can do something very localized or very departmental, or even based through a college, or even through a faculty institute for teaching or learning, that kind of thing, but if the institution itself is, for example, recruits but can't sustain its faculty of color, for example, that's already something that's working against a larger conversation. As I've started to think about WAC, it's in early stages here, but I think a lot about just this idea of ambassadorship and decentralizing, for example, the English department from being the know-all around things like writing across the curriculum or writing itself.

Helping people develop more of an ambassadorship. Supporting one-to-one, more micro interactions with faculty, for example, who are teaching writing, but that they are then in partnership with you. They are then the ambassadors that go back to their department and act as liaisons to how writing is taught. I think similar approaches can happen with thinking about and helping in the micro moments faculty work to be less anti-racist in their writing practices. We

start that article actually with an excerpt where an international graduate student is saying because of their writing, their faculty advisor doesn't take them seriously and they struggle to maintain positions, laws, PIs on grants, and things like that, and they're also writing in their third language. The racism they're experiencing... They have brilliant ideas, but the way that their faculty advisor takes up their writing is in a very dismissive way and degrading way.

While I've been talking about WAC and anti-racism as being these big things that have to be systemically ingrained, I do think there's something to be said for those micro moments of helping faculty who work with graduate students think about the kinds of ways they talk about writing. It's more than just, "Oh, we need to get something published," but it actually links to someone's lived experience. WAC and anti-racism, as university missions, have to have a similar rhythm with that. I mean, I do think these are challenging things to do and to actually do, as opposed to being a mission statement, their work that has to be done. We frame that article also around Dr. April Baker-Bell's work and thinking about how linguistic justice could fit into a larger conversation. There's also so many really fantastic pieces in that special issue. I'm thinking of Dr. Sherri Craig's work where she challenges some of the conversations around grading contracts and really brings nuance to that conversation as well. Some two or three years after writing that, I still think a lot of the same things, but I still think I'm just constantly learning.

SW: Travis, this is my last question. How do these research values inform your approach to mentoring tutors in the writing center and working with the graduate instructors?

TW: As we think about recruiting and supporting tutors who then support our students, I think, for example, I'm thinking back to my old writing center. We had a number of veterans and active military at our institution. We were also a HSI. It was important for me that we shift what was then mostly all white staff and non-vet staff to a Latinx and more vet-represented writing center staff in terms of consulting and also folks in the center who are taking on leadership and initiatives. Some of that, I think, is representation. I don't obviously think it could end with just representation. But when I think about tutor training or, for example, teaching a writing center theories class, I do think it's important that some of these conversations around work and labor are at the forefront. Does every tutor who takes a tutoring course, are they all going to go on to be writing center researchers? Certainly not, and I think that's perfectly fine.

I think, right now, I'm sharing a few dissertation committees here for people interested for multiply marginalized queer and folks of color who would like to be writing center directors, and of which, nationally, we are still very white writing center. The writing center discipline is still very white. I think, in the ways that I can, helping prepare folks who want to go on and be writing center directors through when I'm helping them through coursework, or dissertations, or exams, or that kind of stuff, using this research, and not just my own research, but I'm thinking of Dr. Neisha-Anne Green's work that looks at being a Black woman in a very white writing center field, or Dr. Wonderful Fizen's work that looks at white space and pedagogy in the writing center world, that I'm preparing and making graduate students who are going into this world and do not look like me, who are not white, the affective impact that may face them on the other side of their grad work. I know that's a very grad student pedagogy answer. I'm thinking a lot about tutor training courses. I think with the teaching of writing, I'm thinking maybe an undergrad or first year course, I think, in some ways, just bringing a queer orientation into what's possible

through the research. Right now, I'm teaching our GTA practicum. Some of the GTAs have been concerned that, "Oh, teaching research can be really the super straight, super disembodied, super kind of APA style research report deliverable." Their discomfort with that and their understandable discomfort with that. I've been trying to help them think through more queer orientations to writing-based research in the first year classroom. In what ways can they help students think about embodiment or think about research deliverables that don't look so straight [inaudible 00:30:16], these kinds of things.

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