

Christopher Richmann: Welcome to Professors Talk Pedagogy, a podcast from the Academy for Teaching and Learning at Baylor University. I'm your host, Christopher Richmann. Professors Talk Pedagogy presents discussions with great professors about pedagogy, curriculum and learning in order to propel the virtuous cycle of teaching. As we frankly and critically investigate our teaching, we open new lines of inquiry. We engage in conversation with colleagues, and we attune to students' experiences. All of which not only improves our teaching, but enriches and motivates ongoing investigation. And so the cycle continues.

Today, our guest is Dr. Kara Poe Alexander, Professor of English and Director of Baylor University's Writing Center. Specializing in composition, rhetoric, literacy studies, and writing pedagogy, Dr. Alexander teaches undergraduate and graduate courses ranging from first-year composition to travel writing, to composition theory and pedagogy. She has published dozens of articles and book chapters on various aspects of teaching writing and teaching through writing. We are delighted to have Dr. Alexander on the show to discuss how The Writing Center fits in the mission of the university. Why writing still matters, How to build on students' writing skills throughout their college careers, And much more.

Kara Poe Alexander, thank you for being with us today.

Kara Poe Alexander: Thanks for having me. Glad to be here.

CR: So you are our University's Writing Center Director. And I would love to just hear your thoughts on what you view as the role of a writing center in a university--just more broadly, if you know any of the history of where these things came from, that might be helpful too.

KPA: Okay, yeah, happy to answer that. Writing centers fill a very important role and a distinct role, I think within universities; and it's a role that's pretty layered. We work to elevate the status of writing at a university. And so we kind of value and demonstrate that writing is an indispensable part of university life and of making meaning. It's both a means of communicating, but it's also a tool for learning; and which is how it's often used in college classrooms, is as a tool for learning, an act of discovery, but also as a way to communicate. And so writing centers try to make riding accessible and practical and relevant for all of the diverse writers that visit us, from students, undergraduate and graduate students to faculty and to staff and anybody who comes with their writing needs. And so they are kind of like in some ways, repositories for writing on a university because they bring the disparate writing knowledge and skills from across the university to bear in kind of in one place. And so we're looking at different fields in different disciplines and all of the writing that occurs there. And in the Writing Center, we train our tutors to kind of be able to talk about and discuss these various types of writing, different genres and different disciplines.

CR: I think some of this might be implied in what you've, what you've already said here, but what might faculty or students not know or just be misinformed about when it comes to what a Writing Center is or does?

KPA: I think that writing centers, some of the things that we have to do at Baylor is dispel a lot of the myths and assumptions that people bring in. Like we're a place that will edit or just proofread works so you can submit an essay and we're just kind of like a copy editing service. So we're not that for sure. We're actually a teaching and learning unit on campus where we see it as our goal to teach about writing and to facilitate learning about writing. But ours consultants are also very much learners themselves, so they learn about writing from the clients and writers that they work with. So another thing that we always tried to dispel is that writing is a process, not only a product. So we emphasize writing as a process. So we want the writer to gain skills that they can use after they

leave the session and turn in that one paper. So we, we work on that one document or text or paper. But we also hope to give them, to equip them with the skills they can use to then go on their next paper. Maybe there they have different struggles than they did on that one. Because we've equipped them with kind of problem-solving strategies that they can use.

So we really are place where talk about writing is what we do. You know, I've been in a writing group myself as a faculty member for the past 13 years with four, with three other faculty members here at Baylor. And it's this idea that writing, we're all writers and we all benefit from feedback. And so it's not just good writers that don't and that "we wouldn't need a writing center." It's, it's any kind of writer, good writers, bad writers, although we don't characterize that in that way, because students often come in and say, "I'm a bad writer." Well, we, we try to say, Well, we're not judging your writing abilities. We are really about helping you get from 1 to another point that works with your own writing goals.

CR: Yeah, I think especially for students who come to university so very product oriented and we are trying in so many different ways at the university to make them process oriented instead. I forget who said it, but would you subscribe to the old adage, "Writing is rewriting."

KPA: Oh, yes.

CR: Does that help?

KPA: Yes, writing is revision. We definitely emphasize that because we want them to take that what the feedback that we've given them, also new ideas they've come to in the session. And to take that and revise their writing. You know, we, we, another misconception that we tried to overcome is this idea that writing is only print based work. So we, we also take texts from many different genres and many different types of modes. So we will look at posters, scientific posters, and we'll look at flyers and resumes and visual documents will also give feedback on writing in a video, a script, or things that deal with the rhetorical situation where you're trying to tailor some sort of texts to an audience and a purpose and a context. We really value all kinds of writing. So we don't just look at first-year writing classes in the English department. We really encourage writers from all courses to come and use our services. Because our writers are trained in writing across the disciplines--Technical writing, scientific writing, report writing, as well as typical academic writing that you may it may expect.

CR: Yeah, it seems to me that that's probably something that we could all be better educated about is how the emphasis or approach to college writing has changed, especially in this last 10, 15, 20 years-- We have this idea of what academic writing is, but does that always serve our students the best? So how do you, how do you work with that with students if they are coming with a particular idea of like, well, I have to do college writing. And you're saying, no your, your professors asked you to write a blog. So let's talk about what good writing in that genre is.

KPA: Yeah, that's exactly what we try to emphasize is the rhetorical situation of that. What genre you writing in, who is your audience and what is your purpose? And within that, then they can decide and make choices that allow them to understand form and content. Because you can't just say writing is one thing or writing is general or never use "I" or avoid passive voice because that's only in certain situations that, that's the case. In academic writing in English and history and political science, the use of "I" is common, but in, you know, scientific and technical writing, it's less common because they, they want the data to show and rise up rather than the person that collected the data. And so it's all very contextual. And you can't generalize writing, which is why it's so hard in first year writing to feel the pressure, if you teach that course, to feel the pressure of, of all of the advanced writing or advanced courses thinking that you've done all the writing, the teaching of writing in, in that one

class because that's not the way writing works. Writing builds on itself in it, layers and it changes. And so writers need to be able to transfer what they know to these various contexts.

And just to give you a little bit of history writing centers kind of became widespread in the 1970s when open admissions kind of started. And I mean, they'd been around for a few 100 years or so in, in the 1870s, like right after the Civil War, Harvard instituted a course called English A. And it was the first year writing, the first, first year writing course in the United States. And they had a, an admissions tests that they required all candidates which were men at the time to take in, in the early 1870s, like half of the men were failing this test. And I've looked at this test and I mean, very few of us would pass it today. It asks about Latin and Greek translation and you have to compose in those languages and its algebraic and trigonometry and it's very widespread and kind of difficult, I would say, but half of the men failed it. And so the president at the time was very scared and there was a huge outcry about, well, these men, these candidates can't write. And you know, they didn't want men to be going through their university and then graduate, not being able to write about and solve the pressing problems of the day. And so they instituted this first year writing course. And at the time, and for pretty much almost a 100 years, it was taught the same way. And the emphasis was on grammar and style. And so this kind of came to be known as current traditional rhetoric, and it was very, looking at formulaic features at, at formal correctness, so-called correct writing or proper English. And it wasn't a lot about invention or creating ideas as a tool for discovery. It was much more on, you need to say it the right way. And there wasn't a lot of emphasis on content. And there was actually some judgment about if you couldn't write properly, then you were lazy or not intelligent. And so there came to be kind of this morality attached to it.

Well, in the 1960s, around the time the field of rhetoric and composition or writing studies came to be in existence, this kind of changed and there became much more of an emphasis on writing as a process. And kind of invention and discovery and brainstorming became a huge part of that process. And so, but Harvard's legacy, you know what they did lived on and all universities kind of followed them and modeled their own first-year writing programs after them. And so first-year writing became required pretty much across the United States. And it's still that way today. Most universities require two first-year writing classes. And it's a sequence. Some of that has changed to where they'll take a first-year writing class as a freshman and then a sophomore level second year writing class to kind of make more of a vertical curriculum to where the students are developing in years as well to kind of go along with their social and intellectual maturity. And other universities have instituted "wac and wid" programs. So writing across the curriculum and writing in the discipline. And these are two pretty similar kinds of approaches. But WAC is more where kind of people and writing studies teach other faculty how to add an integrate writing into their classes. So it's more like writing intensive classes. And then writing in the disciplines is the idea that faculty within the, within a discipline teach writing to their students. Because first-year writing, for instance, you can't comprehend and predict all of the different ways students will be called on to write within their major. And in addition to that, you also can't think about and understand the values and the epistemologies and the methodologies that different disciplines use. And so first-year writing is not a course that, "well they should've learned to write there," because writing is not a generalizable skill. And so it's just really important, I think for faculty to keep in mind that writing exists differently for different students and in different disciplines. And when we can teach writing across the board in every class that we teach, I think students start seeing how writing is much more contextual.

CR: Yeah, so something that I struggle to understand and I don't think I'm alone in this is just to how to, how to frame the first year writing experience that students have in relationship to the later writing that they will do. So should we be thinking about this in terms of what the first year

writing course prepare students to do, Or more like the reverse way as, what can I do to reinforce what they have learned, or are the truth somewhere in the middle?

KPA: I think that's a good question. I think it is a little bit in somewhat in the middle to where you think about the idea of transfer. And so what instructors are wanting is for students to be able to take what they learned in that first year writing class and transfer it in their class. And transfer is not this idea of you take what you know and you just plop it on a new course. It's that you, you adapt, you remediate, you reuse information. And, and so that means it's a different kind of learning and knowledge. And so what worked in first-year writing? The reason students struggle when they go to a junior level chemistry course or an engineering course where they now have to write, It's because it's a different genre. It has different kind of values embedded in it because the discipline has different disciplinary values. And so that instructor may be frustrated because that student is so-called unable to write. But it's not that they're unable to, write, It's that they just haven't learned to write in this specific context. And so I think if instructors reveal what their expectations are or what the disciplinary expectations are, not just their own, but this is the reason that a scientific report follows this structure. Or just revealing to students the kind of the reason behind it. To let them understand more of that metacognition, which allows them to then transfer it. Because first year writing courses are really good at instilling habits of mind in students. Reflection, metacognition, thinking about writing. And so they're able to bring those concepts to the forefront of the student's mind. And if we can do that in advanced courses too, that don't have writing as the, it's not a writing course per se, but does have writing in it, then I think students will learn to write better.

CR: How can instructors make those connections maybe more explicit, are there--and I know this would this would change depending on the instructor and depending on the institution, But is there a set of concepts of terminology that when I'm teaching a sophomore, junior, senior level course, that will sort of spark that light bulb go, Oh yeah, I remember that from my earlier writing training.

KPA: Yeah. I mean, I think some of the terminology that they use in first-year writing or in writing in general, in writing studies, is definitely audience, purpose, context. Those three aspects of the rhetorical situation to, to know, to help students remember they are not writing in a vacuum. There's actually someone that they're targeting, an audience they're writing to. It may be a general scholarly audience, but they can assume certain things about that audience. And then it helps them know what to write. Their purpose too; what is their purpose. It should be something more than writing for the professor or writing for the teacher. My purposes, I want to persuade you to adopt this point of view, or I want to persuade you that this experiment I conducted has a good methodology. And so whatever their purpose is, I think then it determines what they're going to write. So definitely those terms. But I also think like revision. So the writing process terms: drafting, revision, getting feedback on their writing, taking their writing to the writing center. And so one of the things that, when we talk to faculty that we tried to instill is for them to build writing assignments into the structure of a major writing assignment. So smaller assignments that can scaffold that major assignment. So maybe they have a draft due before their final draft that they have an in-class peer review on. Or maybe they have an annotated bibliography or a literature review that becomes part of the assignment and part of the final product. But it, it isn't just this one end point of the product where they are then able to see and revise and rethink and discover new things which really will help them within their disciplines.

CR: What makes for a good writing prompt and what makes for bad writing prompt? Because I'm sure at the Writing Center you see them all. And part of the struggle is not just helping a student who's maybe having trouble interpret, but also for the writing center tutors to try to interpret something that's removed from them.

KPA: Yeah, this is something we talk about at the Writing Center. One, we definitely think that you need to have a prompt. So start there. If you don't have a writing prompt for assignments, it's really problematic for students, even if you orally tell them, they still don't quite understand. And which is some of the confusion that they have in terms of understanding. "Well, I just don't know what this professor wants," or "this professor wants so many different things." And really there's probably a reason the professor once that and it's most likely connected to their discipline or field. And so to reveal more about their, their, what they want by connecting it to their field, I think helps the student. I definitely think good prompts are clear. And, and really in terms of what the professor is looking for. So, you know, sometimes we want open-ended assignments because we want students to be able to fulfill that however they want. And that can be very freeing for some students, but it can also be very frightening for others. And so if there are additional ways that you can write and add to the prompt to allow different students with different learning styles to fulfill that in the way that they think would work for them. So you could just give them examples, or you could show them a model. Or you could analyze the kinds of papers that you are wanting them to write. Like if it's a published article, you can analyze that and show them. These, this paper has these kinds of sections. If in the case, for instance, of a scientific research article where you typically have the introduction and then the methods, and then the results and then the discussion. Students may not know that. And even if they've read a lot of them, if that's not pointed out to them, they're not internalizing it. "Oh, that this is actually a genre convention."

CR: What about rubrics? How did the factor into this?

KPA: So I tend to shy away from rubrics. I'm not a big rubric user myself. My field of writing studies, we kind of have differing views on this as well. But the problem I see with rubrics is that they're a lot, they penalize a lot more the writing than actually if you just read it and, and analyzed it and graded it without that rubric, because the rubric has this standard and I know like AP grading, they use a rubric and there's a really good reason for that because it's, it's this one kind of prompt and one kind of assignment. But I tend to just kind of tell the students, to give them, These are the ways I'm going to evaluate the essay, but not so much I guess disseminate it or, or distribute it into an A, B, C, D, or F. I, I can do that more in like tech writing, technical writing. I teach PWR 3300 because it's much more straightforward and objective. But academic writing is more subjective. And it's, I just like the flexibility of not being tied to that rubric.

CR: I have been leaning more and more the direction of doing more group work in my classes, even taking quizzes in groups and that sort of thing. Do you run into instructors who are assigning group writing projects? That seems to me like something that would not only facilitate community based learning, but also is useful for after school because there's a lot of collaboration, a lot of co-writing that happens in a lot of workplaces.

KPA: Yes. There are a lot of disciplines that use group work and that use group work to facilitate writing assignments and, or to fulfill a writing project. In technical writing, I have used groups for over almost 20 years and we usually have to collaborative writing assignments in that class. And early on in my career, I worked with Doctor Joanna Wolf who actually published a book on this. It's called *Team Writing: a Guide to Writing in Groups*. And maybe we can link that resource. But it's so she received an NSF grant to study the way that collaborative writing works in student teams and student groups. And one of the, There's a lot of problems and difficulties with, with kind of formulating a collaborative writing project 1. Students either love it or hate it. They either are dreading working with a group or they are so excited about it. 2. You typically have someone that does all the work. You also have an unequal division of labor, like who's going to write this? And when you do like divide up sections of a report, for instance, oftentimes the voices are very different. There's like four or five distinct voices rather than a truly collaborative project. So I tend to follow this book. She gives

a lot of great advice in terms of how to structure and scaffold groups. And the main idea is that you, that writing needs to be central to a group project. That it can't be kind of this last minute thing that you do or think about. And so she calls it the layered division of collaborative writing, where you have, you may have different group members have different roles like a project manager or a research manager, or the design manager or writing manager. But every single person on the team writes and contributes to parts of the report. Sometimes it's the whole report. So maybe one person drafts this section and then they pass it off to another person who then looks at it and revises it. So all of those parts of the writing process are scaffolded and built into the collaborative writing projects. So in the end, you really do end up with a product that is better than what any one of these people by themselves could have done. And it's benefited from four to five eyes, giving really good reads and reviews of the text.

CR: Now this is exactly what I stress with my students. I have not yet implemented a wholesale large writing project, but when I'm talking to them about why I want them to do so much group work. I say you truly are smarter together than you are separately. The reason that, that doesn't always pan out is because the activity might not be designed quite right. So, but with a well-designed activity and the environments set up just so we can bring out more than the sum of the parts here.

KPA: Yes, yes, and I mean groups benefit from having a task schedule and kind of even like a team charter, what are the rules that we agree upon? How often are we going to meet? When are we going to check our email or post drafts? And so things that keep them accountable in addition to the writing dates and deadlines can really help with group work.

CR: And how do you help students not to hate it?

KPA: I think by each of them having a distinct role that that is one thing that helps; so they know what they should be working on, as well as having that layered writing approach. But one of the things I do is I give two grades for collaborative writing projects. I give a project quality grade and a collaborative grade. So the project quality grade is actually based on the document itself, the final product, and everyone gets the same grade. And then I have a collaborative grade that is based on my views, my observations of their collaboration efforts, as well as presence in class. So attendance in class. Then I have a kind of what I call a collaboration report where students evaluate each other on their team. And so they, you know, they mention what they did on the assignment. They mentioned what other people did. They give a strength and a weakness for each person, and then they give kind of what they think the grade should be. And then I use that in my evaluation and that's usually 20 percent of the grade. So it's not as much as the project quality grade. But it, it helps students know that if I'm going to do a lot of work and do good work, I'll still get benefit from that rather than just end up with with the same grade for the whole team when Janie didn't do much work.

CR: And thinking about that learning in community too, I wonder about the peer review process. You've, you've mentioned that. Under the larger umbrella of just helping students think about writing as the stages of draft and revision. Then there's also the added layer of a peer. You might ask a peer to do part of this, this work. So what are some of the particular challenges? What are the benefits of doing peer review with students?

KPA: Yeah, peer review is an interesting, interesting pedagogical tool. It can be really good or it can go really poorly. And I think that the key for me as an instructor when it goes really well is that I have really set up my expectations as to what I want from peer review and how I want them to give feedback. And so we have before the peer review day, we talk about what the expectations are for this specific genre. What we should be looking for as reviewers of the text, why that's important. And then kind of what we shouldn't necessarily focus on. You know, in the Writing Center we use the

term higher-order concerns, which means that we want to focus on argument, purpose, and audience, and organization and evidence more than grammar and style at this point. If the student does a good revision that would be changed later. And so we want them to focus on these bigger things. And so it's hard to put down your pen and not just mark typos or grammar errors. But that really doesn't facilitate learning as much as getting, asking questions of the writer that allow them to think about what they're saying, what they want to say, what they're trying to say, and how it's not coming across to the, to the reader. So I mean, that's kind of some advice I have. It's, it's really hard, but I think it needs some forethought. I typically do give a handout during peer review that with questions that they can answer. And I also encourage them to kind of give feedback on the draft itself, but more so like big comments or questions or places of confusion, rather than just marking errors.

CR: You mentioned with the work of the Writing Center, thinking about accessibility. And you know, with with the Writing Center sort of coming into its own at the time of open admissions in the 1970s. Also brings to mind questions about like non native English speakers and writers. So how do you deal with that at the Writing Center, I know you're not the only the only unit on campus that works with students and faculty with those concerns. But in what way do you work with that?

KPA: Yes. So we actually work and collaborate a lot with the other organizations on campus. They'll give us presentations, we'll give them presentations. But we, we try to hire a diverse staff--is one of the ways that we deal with it. We have, I think right now we have two or three Chinese speakers. We have people of color. We have people from diverse backgrounds and disciplines so that we can help students with their diverse needs. We always give in our orientations, our consultants undergo pretty rigorous initial orientation and then ongoing weekly tutor education where we talk about these topics. And about 20 percent of the writers that come visit us are non native English speakers or multilingual writers. And so it's a big part of our job and we see that as very important. And so they do have somewhat different needs than native speakers, where grammar and vocabulary is part of a higher-order concern. And so you have to work with them in different ways. It's not about, we'll save the grammar and error, because that's part of their learning process of learning a language. And so you still want to see if you can understand the content and the ideas. And if it's just an article like "an" or, "the," for instance, that's not as big of a deal as if they're using the wrong vocabulary word or they're, they're saying a sentence in a way that is not clear or doesn't make sense. So we really tried to emphasize, we value that the language that this student is bringing with them and the languages in a lot of cases. So we try to use that as a resource instead of seeing that as some sort of detriment to them, it's actually a resource. So we want, we also emphasize that this is a learning process. This is going to be the lifeline--life long process. When we hear non-native English speakers, they speak with an accent and we all recognize that and understand that and that's okay. And yet we don't really make those allowances in writing a lot of times. And yet it's still part of their process of coming to understand a language. And so, you know, there's a new movement, fairly new the past 20 years on translanguaging. And so it's viewing these multiple languages as, as a resource, I guess you could say in ways that help them, but also help other writers and other students in those classes with them. And it's, it's a, it's a way that we value the student's own languages as well. So even if students come in, they speak and they speak English, but they may have a different dialect or something. We try to use that in a productive way rather than a "don't ever speak that way or write that way, that's not appropriate." We talk a lot about rhetorical context. And so when is a good time to use that and why? And you need to know that you're making these choices and the reasons that you're doing it, and the consequences that that may have.

CR: Yeah, That seems to me where the conversation of the place of standard academic English is going to. We, we're not at a place culturally where we can just get rid of it. But we can talk about when it's appropriate and why, right?

KPA: Right.

CR: So I want you to prognosticate here. Where, where do you think college writing is, is headed? I mean, we've seen a lot of changes in the last generation. Is there any way to predict what's going to be, what a writing center is going to do and 10, 15, 20 years.

KPA: I definitely think that one of the big changes is technology and the kinds of assignments being assigned right now in writing, in writing classes, but also across the university, are much more diverse than just an academic essay. You're not only having diverse written genres, but you're also having diverse multimodal text, audio and video essays, podcast, digital stories. So I could see the writing center here becoming like a multiliteracies center. Something that kind of we, We serve a lot of these kinds now, but because our name doesn't say that we, people often don't know that about us. And we are not completely trained in that. And so maybe it merge, merging with some sort of communication scholars and people that could foster kind of like a communication center or digital media and becoming several different disciplines merging together rather than just like rhetoric and composition. And so that's one way becoming a place that really helps with any kind of text rather than just kind of print based writing.

I also think that we, we may see multiple writing centers on the campus. And we already actually have multiple writing centers here at Baylor, we have, there's a writing center in the School of Education, which is for their doctoral students. There's a graduate writing center that serves graduate students, but also students working on dissertations. So kind of with longer text. In the Writing Center, we have online and in-person appointments, and we serve graduate students. But these graduate, the graduate writing center is staffed by students that are at advanced stages and so they can serve them in different ways.

So I kind of think, I mean writing at the university, I hope it becomes more of a vertical curriculum to where writing is emphasized throughout the student's experience, rather than just in first year writing. At Baylor in the College of Arts and Sciences, the new core curriculum, there is no writing in the core. There is a research writing distribution list that has first-year writing that students can take. And I think 80 percent of them still do take that. But I think instructors can't assume any more that they will have had a writing course before they come to them in their classes because it's not a prerequisite. And so it's, I think it is really important for instructors to ask about students prior writing experiences, kind of on their first day or in a survey so that they know where the student is starting from, because it is kinda going to be different for the years to come.

CR: That's very helpful to think about. Well Kara Poe Alexander, thank you for your insights and for the good work you do here at Baylor.

KPA: Thank you for having me.

CR: Our thanks to Dr. Kara Poe Alexander once again for speaking with us today. In our show notes, you'll find a link to Joanna Wolf's, text *Team Writing*. That's our show. Join us again next time for Professors Talk Pedagogy.