



## Podcast Transcript

*Stories from First-Year Composition* co-editor Jo-Anne Kerr speaks with chapter author Doug Downs and co-editor and chapter author Ann Amicucci

[Intro music]

**Jo-Anne:** Hi, I'm Jo-Anne Kerr, host of today's conversation and co-editor, with Ann Amicucci, of *Stories from First-Year Composition: FYC Pedagogies that Foster Student Agency and Writing Identity*, published in the WAC Clearinghouse Practices and Possibilities series. You can read this and other books published by the WAC Clearinghouse at [wac.colostate.edu](http://wac.colostate.edu)

This podcast features a conversation with Doug Downs and Ann Amicucci, both of whom contributed chapters to *Stories from First-Year Composition*. We'll hear Doug and Ann discuss the current state of first-year composition at their respective institutions and their thoughts about how their pedagogies help students develop agency as writers. They also share how their own identities as teachers of first-year composition have evolved as a result of their scholarship.

[Music stops]

**Jo-Anne:** I thought we would begin by asking you to introduce yourselves and to identify the positions you currently hold.

**Doug:** I'm Doug Downs. I'm an Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at Montana State University in the Department of English there. I just finished my eleventh year here.

**Ann:** And I'm Ann Amicucci. I'm Director of First-Year Rhetoric and Writing and Assistant Professor of English at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs.

**Jo-Anne:** Thank you. Let's begin with both of you sharing a brief depiction of the current state of first-year composition from your perspectives as teachers, scholars, and, in Ann's case, as a teacher, scholar, and writing program administrator. In particular, what strengths are you aware of in the way that first-year composition is designed and delivered at your institutions, and what weaknesses and/or challenges exist?

**Ann:** You know, I am finding that FYC, we're facing pressure from so many stakeholders, and I know this is a subject Doug has written about. In the state of Colorado, as I know in so many other states, we're facing a lot of state pressure to get students to a finished college degree faster, to give credit for FYC for pretty much any type of test you can think of, and so a lot of these pressures, I think, devalue what FYC has to offer. But here at UCCS, I feel that we're doing things well.

One of the successes of our program, our curriculum is based in rhetoric, and this was thanks to a former director, Debra Frank Dew, and work that she did with faculty to develop a rhetoric-focused curriculum. And I would say its major success is that it really helps students see the value of FYC beyond just that course. So when we teach them writing through the lens of rhetorical analysis, they really see how those abilities apply to their lives outside of school and to the work that they plan to do in their college majors.

**Doug:** Until last year, I had spent the five previous years as director of our program, and I'm always struck by the challenge of getting instructors more or less on the same page conceptually about what it is we mean to be doing with the course. And so I would really characterize my years as director as a movement toward the kind of professional engagement and development that would make it make sense for our instructor core as a whole to do the kinds of composition work that Deb really pioneered sort of at the same time that Liz Wardle and I were working on Writing About Writing originally, and those are very close, very close cousins in terms of pedagogies.

So I think some of the things that our program is doing well, we, too, are really stressing the rhetorical thinking and trying to get students beyond a pure sort of classical rhetoric take. You know, ethos, logos, and pathos is a starting point, not an ending point, and trying to think about rhetoric more broadly than that. And just, on the larger scale, reconceptualizing writing itself, having students leave our classrooms understanding, you know, for example, revision as something, transforming their understandings of it from extra, or punishment, or a sign of failure, to a notion of it as inevitable and non-optional. So that's really, we're doing well in those areas, I would say.

**Ann:** And I might just add to that, I think that's so interesting because we have the first layer of getting students to see the value, and then you're speaking to that second layer of when we have large programs. Our field is so large and diverse that I know here, we have faculty that represent, you know, every different angle of English Studies that you can think of, and so we're often corraling together all these different perspectives, sometimes really disparate values among faculty, to figure out, what does a curriculum look like in a particular context.

**Doug:** And Ann, I love your point, too, about the array of stakeholders that we have and some of the constraints that can represent. I'm thinking just structurally, even after instructors are on the same page, and we feel like we know what we want to do with students, like we really want to stress, and this comes up some in my chapter, that writing is collaborative by default, by nature, and that that sort of lone wolf or solo hero writing, that's the weird moments in writing.

And yet students, you know, culturally we have that exactly backwards. Okay, so if I want to use my first-year comp course to create a curriculum that demonstrates that, it's really tough. It's just structurally difficult, even when we want to, to say, *Okay, what would a largely collaborative first-year comp experience look like?* And that's a piece of those stakeholders. It becomes so far outside of what the academy has been designed to do that it just, it's a challenge for the ages, really.

**Jo-Anne:** Thank you. In the introduction to our collection, we allude to what Doug refers to in his piece “What is First-Year Composition” as FYC’s “public charter,” a charter based upon the misinformed notion that FYC should and can teach students to write “correctly.” And so it’s predicated on the perception of FYC courses as skills workshops. While we can’t expect the public, including even our colleagues and institutions’ administrators, to be familiar with the composition scholarship and research from the past fifty-plus years that have resulted in deeper and more nuanced understandings of writing, we can resist this public charter and disrupt the status quo. What are some ways that the pedagogies that you share in your chapters disrupt the status quo and, therefore, resist the public charter?

**Doug:** Well, I think what I most want to see in my composition pedagogy is rejection of the cultural premise that there’s this fundamental writing skills that FYC is supposed to re-mediate. So, in comp pedagogy, I think we should be rejecting out of hand the myth that typically *College students can’t write* or that *They can’t complete a sentence*, and if your experience is anything like mine, even very well-meaning faculty around campus, that’s sort of what they know to say about students writing is, you know, *My students can’t complete a sentence*. Even when they’re not blaming that on us, that’s just the perceived condition.

So the thing that I most want to move away from the idea that a writing course is supposed to be designed to fix students and instead say, *That’s not a thing. That’s not a real, actual problem*. So if we have this space, what can we do with it? So and then I wind up writing about double standards because they’re so powerful in exposing the brokenness that so many of our sort of cultural scripts about writing, that difference between the stories culturally that we tell ourselves about how writing works versus what we actually do as professionals when we write become such a powerful lens on what is it that we need to resist or reject. And then the comp course becomes a scene for doing that.

**Ann:** Similarly, building on what Doug said about rejecting the notion that students can’t write or that something is wrong with students, one of the things I try to do in my chapter is really argue that students have valuable input on what their writing education should look like. So similar to how Doug is saying students aren’t something broken that needs to be fixed, I also think students themselves have been writers for many, many years and often have something valuable to say about how they can develop as writers. They often are strong at identifying the areas where they want to flex their writing muscles a little more.

**Jo-Anne:** Thank you, Ann and Doug. In Chapter 1, Doug investigates multiple disconnects between what institutions of higher education say we value in writing—the values we communicate to students in the classroom—and what we actually value, or the ways faculty actually engage in writing practices. He writes about how we expect student writers to work independently and to document any help they receive yet work collaboratively ourselves. We expect students to read a new range of published texts each semester, digest them, and incorporate them into writing, while we ourselves may work with similar sources across multiple projects and build a network of source texts over time.

Doug calls for us to make the investigation of actual academic writing practices the focus of FYC. His Writing About Writing approach tasks students with demystifying academic writing

for themselves. Students become the investigators who interview professional writers and analyze writing artifacts. Doug, what connections do you see between this pedagogical approach and student agency? And how might this approach benefit students when they move beyond first-year composition?

**Doug:** I like that you bring up agency. I'm reminded of a word that goes right with it, which is "agenda," right? Same root. And I'm always struck by how, as you work through various levels of education, essentially, at each increasing level students regain some of their own agenda. But you know every high school to undergrad to graduate, master's to PhD, every step of it is, you get back a little of your own ability as a student to say, *I was interested in this. Or that.* And to shape your own set of students. So there's a way in which I might actually characterize Writing About Writing approaches, when they use that sort of, you know, choose your own adventure, study what matters to you approach, it's almost like they're bringing a little bit of the grad school agenda down into the undergrad and even to the first-year level of that.

So I'm always interested in the limitations around that. Students don't get to choose not to research. They don't get to opt out of a project altogether. That's still a real constraint that more or less maps onto a professional writing experience. Even as a pretty experienced now professional writer myself, there are some projects that I can reject and there are some projects that I can't. That I do, the farther I go, the more selective I get about my own agenda, what I will accept for working on, what I won't.

So there's always that kind of play, and I think the more we're doing to design pedagogies that create relatively the same kinds of agency and agenda-shifting as students might encounter outside a writing classroom, I think the better we're doing at transforming from that, you know, *Thou art the student. Here's your little box. Fit in it.* To something that's a lot more likely to make sense and to have meaning later on. And I think, Jo-Anne, that gets to the second part of your question.

We're kind of banking on, in I think both the designs that I'm talking about and the designs that Ann is talking about, I think we're banking on the idea that students will learn patterns of thought, habits of mind, and get used to particular approaches to problem solving that they'll recognize later on—this is the transfer piece—that they'll recognize later on as, *Oh, I can do that here, too.* This question of agency, depending on how we define it. If we mean the ability to sort of knowledgeably make meaningful decisions and have an impact on people around us, if that's agency, then knowledge really is power in some ways. It, you do get this sense of, you know there's a huge agency in even knowing how to ask the right questions at the right time.

There's further agency in being able to set one's expectations as a writer to be realistic for the setting that one is entering. You know, something as simple as knowing that a question is necessary, like, *What is this TPS report? Can you tell me who reads it? What they do with it? Where does it go from here?* A student, if we can teach them that it's not a weakness to ask a question like that, it's responsible. It's a sign of writerly power to ask a question like that because you know that you have the right to that question. It doesn't make sense not to ask that question. If we can teach that, then that seems to be an idea that they can take from the class and be a little fearless later on. Whether it's an assignment that a professor is giving that they don't

understand or they're entering a professional position or a workforce in some way. They have the power to know that it's okay to ask those questions.

**Ann:** I love that you brought habits of mind into it. And so I know we all have in the back of our minds the eight habits of mind in *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. I love how you connected agency to the idea of responsibility, of course another habit of mind. As students have the power to create and enact their own agenda, they also have the responsibility to do so, to shape that agenda themselves instead of expecting that someone is always going to shape it for them.

**Jo-Anne:** Thank you, Doug. In Chapter 3, Ann advocates for giving student choices in how digital technologies are used in first-year composition. The students she interviewed shared experiences of having teachers prescribe when and how they could use digital tools in class, such as forbidding laptops or cell phones in the classroom. Their perspectives caused Ann to reflect on her own teaching in the chapter. Ann, you advocate for drawing on student expertise in shaping how technology can be used in first-year composition. In what ways beyond what you discuss in your chapter does this practice benefit your students? And are there any drawbacks to giving students this agency to shape classroom technology use?

**Ann:** I would say, beyond what I discuss in the chapter, this practice of giving students agency to shape what digital technology looks like in the classroom has ended up really changing what in-class activities look like. So, some years ago, I was the type of teacher who would come to class with a lesson plan and then enact that lesson plan, and students would play along, I would hope. But now I've become much more a teacher who presents, you know, *Here's what we're going to be working with today. Here's what I have planned for us.* But then I've created a classroom environment where it's quite common for students to say, *Well, what if we did it this way? Or What if we tried tackling it from another angle?*

So here's a real simple example. I'm thinking of a recent first-year composition course where I had students get into a small-group activity and just in setting up the activity, I said, *Could you each, in your groups, designate a note taker, have the note taker take notes, and then at the end, we'll come together, you'll share your notes.* And you know, someone just spoke up and said, *Wait, hang on. What if we just used the discussion board space on Canvas. Let's all put our notes there and then we can share and respond to them there.* Of course! That made so much more sense.

So I would say that's been the biggest change in my pedagogy is students really speaking up. Students' technology use outside of class is such a big part of their writing lives that part of this pedagogy means that students' digital writing practices become part of the writing that we're discussing in class. We know that many researchers have looked at how literacy practices across contexts influence each other. I find that by talking openly in the classroom about how we use digital technologies, we're often then talking more and more about students' digital writing practices, and then that helps them see how the writing practices influence each other.

You did ask, though, about any drawbacks. And I would say the one drawback is, a number of students' digital writing practices tend to be informal and tend to be writing that's completed, in

my cases, off the cuff, for a rhetorical purpose but not necessarily with a revision practice, for example. And so the one risk, I think, in bringing students' digital writing practices into the classroom is that it might risk suggesting to students that the writing that we're doing for academic purposes can also be done in an off-the-cuff manner. But really, again, I think that just presents an opportunity for us to talk about how writing works.

**Doug:** I really like your example of the, you know, the student realizing, *Or we could just do it on Canvas and share the notes and stuff*. It strikes me as an example of, there are so many instances, especially in my experience around technology, where the students are able to make connections about what things can be used for that sort of never occur to me. I'm just, I tend to be less flexible in my thinking about. And this I see more and more around Google Docs particularly, as students come up with ideas for how to use that. And I'm curious, you connect this with agency, and you connect this with innovation, right? This sense that we don't have a static sort of set of knowledge of writing so much as if we can get in a space with students and sort of all bring what we've got, these new ideas can emerge. Am I hearing you well, is that something that you, that becomes a goal for your pedagogy as well?

**Ann:** Yes. Absolutely. Your saying that makes me think of, you know, when we talk about teaching certain digital tools in the classroom, we'll often hear people say, *Well, why teach students how to use a particular program when that program might not exist by the time they graduate?* But I think you're right, that innovation, the ability to see that any writing task isn't going to have a "teacher," I'm putting that word in quotation marks, who's going to tell you exactly what tools to use but that you're going to draw on your own resources to figure out what tools best fit your rhetorical purpose.

**Doug:** Neat.

**Jo-Anne:** The final question asks you to refocus yourself, rather than thinking about your first-year composition students, to think about yourself, as first-year composition teachers. So in your first-year composition courses, you both promote and affirm students' identities as writers by providing a measure of autonomy through a kind of abrogation of authority.

Doug's students, for example, are invited to design their own inquiry projects based upon their own questions about writing and writers, questions that are designed to shed light on professional writing practices. Ann, you advocate for the importance of drawing on student expertise when considering how to utilize digital technology in first-year composition, while acknowledging the wealth of knowledge that students bring with them to the course.

While the collection is focused on the development of students' writerly identities, it appears that the pedagogies that you share in your chapters necessitated a kind of rethinking of your identities as teachers of first-year composition. Would you please talk for a moment about how your identities as teachers of first-year composition have evolved as a result of the scholarship that you share in your chapters?

**Doug:** That makes me think about sort of statements of teaching philosophy that I've written along the way. And back to a few years ago, probably actually the very beginning of my sort of

first professor positions, where I was trying to come to grips with the difference between teaching and learning. And starting to recognize that there's quite a gulf and quite a gap there and that, as a teacher, I was less interested in teaching than I was in learning as an outcome, as a what is the point of being here. And then trying to figure out if there isn't a sort of direct linkage between "I teach" and "they learn," then what's actually happening? And so I think one of my sort of big identity moves along the way has been the growing awareness of, I don't so much teach as I create spaces and experiences in which students would have the opportunity to think about and engage and practice with and thus learn in the areas that I'm hoping that they will.

But it becomes quite non-direct in ways that I didn't used to think of when I began as a teacher. And then I kind of link that as well to, to that difference, this comes back to rejecting composition's public charter. In composition's public charter, we're really supposed to be judges, we're supposed to be gatekeepers, you know, all of these metaphors that were being interrogated particularly back in the '70s and early '80s. And the alternative to that is access, right? I've come to think of my own role as a teacher as an opening, as a way of, in some ways, getting out of the way, as a way of enabling, as a way of helping students become more themselves rather than become more what the academy wants them to be.

And that's in the roots of our field, right? It's Murray, and Macrorie, and Elbow. It's Susan Miller rejecting the notion that first-year comp is about cleaning students up and purifying them. And that shift, that fundamental difference between a judging and an accessing sort of mission, for comp, it takes a different teacher identity. It just takes a really big shift, I think. It has something to do, and this probably comes back to this abrogation of authority that you're talking about, Jo-Anne. It has something to do with rejecting hierarchy in ways that institutions are, frankly, not good at.

The whole point of an institution is to create a superstructure, to put hierarchies into place, and institutions, I think, get really uncomfortable when that hierarchy gets interrogated or when we say, you know, *That was, it was never the point*. So probably the last, the other piece of my identity that's really had to shift is to figure out teacher-student boundaries. The institution prescribes particular interaction that it's okay to have, and so teachers are supposed to give assignments and supposed to direct and supposed to be the authorities and these kinds of things. And the institution doesn't have a lot of space for a teacher to say, *That's not really authority that I'm interested in*.

I think we're going to get farther on the learning, rather than the teaching, if we say we don't need that hierarchy, that authority, we can believe and act as if our students know as much as we do. They just know differently. They know different things. But that we all start from the sort of same basis of experience matters and voice matters and these kinds of things. So having to grow my identity beyond what an institution offers for what a teacher is supposed to be. I think that's, that's been the big learning curve for me, to say, okay, where is it going to be workable to not be that hierarchical figure but, rather, to be a partner, to be a co-learner, to be a fellow explorer, and to say, *My authority doesn't rest on knowing everything. My authority rests on how comfortable I can be in saying what I don't know*. These are truths I think that we learn as Ph.D. students but that our institutions don't give us an easy way to talk with students about.

**Jo-Anne:** Thanks, Doug. Ann?

**Ann:** I would say, I used to be a much more rigid teacher. I think when I was a new teacher, I believed in the public charter a little bit, and so I used to take the approach of seeing a classroom as, *I'm the person who's going to set out what we're going to learn and how we're going to learn it*, and over time I've really come to see teaching as much more of an experiment that students and I are conducting together. My experience has been that many students come to FYC wanting to know what the expectations are and *What do I need to meet them to earn a certain grade*, and I really try, with varying degrees of success, to refocus them toward just getting excited about the concepts we're working with in class and getting excited about our writing projects. I think with this approach to my FYC pedagogy my courses have become a lot messier, but I've found that they've become much more meaningful to students. So I've found that students are much more excited about what we're doing in class and about what they're learning and proud, really, of the writing that comes of it.

**Doug:** I'm enough Type A, and I think maybe a lot of teachers start out that way, that that messiness is really alien. This is one of the things that really has to move and shift for teachers who start out liking a kind of neatness is that we're not going to have that, things don't always work out, etcetera, so I love that you frame it that way.

**Jo-Anne:** There's a kind of courage to, when you abrogate authority. Parker Palmer talks about "the courage to teach" and this seems to reflect those ideas very clearly and in a very important way.

It's been a pleasure to talk with Doug Downs and Ann Amicucci. Music in this podcast is by Dan-O at [DanoSongs.com](http://DanoSongs.com). We encourage you to visit the WAC Clearinghouse website to check out additional podcasts and more materials related to the book *Stories from First-Year Composition*.

[Closing music]