Podcast Transcript

Stories from First-Year Composition co-editor Ann Amicucci speaks with co-editor and chapter author Jo-Anne Kerr and chapter author Nan Sitler.

[Intro music]

Ann: Hi, I'm Ann Amicucci, host of today's conversation and co-editor, with Jo-Anne Kerr, 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

Today's conversation features Jo-Anne Kerr and Helen Sitler, who have both authored chapters in *Stories from First-Year Composition*. We'll hear their advice on how to foster students' identities as writers and how class discussions of writing rules can lead students to take ownership of their writing.

[Music stops]

Ann: Thank you both for being here. Would you please introduce yourselves?

Jo-Anne: I'm Jo-Anne Kerr, I'm one of the editors of the collection along with Ann Amicucci, and I am recently retired Professor of English and Director of the English Education Program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Helen: I'm Helen Sitler, and I, too, was a Professor in the English Department at IUP. I retired three years ago.

Ann: Thank you so much. So, you've both written chapters for our section of our book titled "Foster Students' Development of Writing Identities." So our focus in this conversation will be on how students develop and reflect on the identities they form as writers in first-year composition. By a writer's identity, I mean the way an individual identifies as or thinks of him or herself as a writer. Helen, I'm going to ask about your experience in Basic Writing first, and then, Jo-Anne, I'll ask you to talk about how your experiences relate.

Helen, in your chapter, you profile two students who are now seniors in college and looking back on their experiences in Basic Writing. Both students came to college with limited writing experience and then developed agency in your course that led them to experiment with and have confidence in their writing. How would you describe the process you've seen students go through in Basic Writing as they take on the identity of a writer?

Helen: I often felt when I was teaching Basic Writing that students would come into the early class meetings feeling as if writing was something that happened to them, and they [pause]. High school teachers are under such pressure for test scores that, you know, they do what they can to help students experience writing as something that students are in control of, but so much is out of their control because it's going to a test reader and so I think they arrive with that standardized testing background really prominent in the way they think about writing, so they expect to be given a topic, they expect to have to write about something they don't care at all about, they expect to have to produce a five-paragraph theme and to follow particular rules that their teacher has talked to them about, so it's almost as if some alien creature has inhabited them and the alien creature puts words on the page, and then it's done.

So I think one of the first things I always tried to do was give them, reading was really linked with writing in my course, and I would deliberately choose readings that exhibited none of the properties that they thought writing was supposed to have. And then we would look at them to determine, *All right, well what's the effect of starting a sentence with the word "And"? Or what's the effect of a paragraph that's only one sentence long?*

And, so they would begin to see that there were a lot of things that writers did that were unlike the things they had been taught they were supposed to be doing. And then I'd say, *Okay, so let's try this. You know, which of these things do you want to try in your writing? And repeated over and over again, it's just a freewrite. It's just a draft. This will change. It's not possible for you to do this wrong. Anything that you do is okay because it can all be changed.*

I think that's where I would begin to see them actually feeling some ownership and some agency, so I was deliberately trying to get them to do things that they may have been told they weren't supposed to do. So then I would see them begin to be able to articulate what it was they were doing, and all of a sudden it wasn't an alien creature anymore doing the writing, it was a person who was in control of something that was putting words on the page.

Ann: Thank you. And so, Jo-Anne, in what way does Helen's experience resonate with or reflect what you've witnessed in FYC [first-year composition] students?

Jo-Anne: Likewise, my students' experiences in English 101: College Writing were of course shaped by their past experiences with writing. Ashley, in her chapter, addresses that very clearly.

Ann: And you're referring to Ashley Ritter, a former student of yours whose work you discuss in your chapter and who has also authored the chapter in our collection titled "A Transition."

Jo-Anne: She came with the expectation or the hope, I should say, that she wouldn't have to write five-paragraph essays. I think, too, that there was a, what I noticed and I think Helen alludes to is that there was a preoccupation with correctness, you know, a form that had to be strictly adhered to. I think, too, there was an overall lack of confidence that I noticed, that oftentimes, when I asked students to articulate their understandings of themselves as writers, they often would share a feeling of a kind of lack of confidence in their abilities, that writing was a unique talent that they just didn't possess. I think also, at the same time, though, there was a

kind of openness to rethink those understandings about writing and about themselves as writers. So most of the time students were amenable to what I asked them to do.

One of the most helpful assignments that I asked students to do that really began to open up their perception of writing and how writing fits into their lives is a very easy assignment, it asks them to keep a record of all the writing they did for a few days, and of course students will often default, if you ask them about writing, they often default to academic writing, which is perfectly understandable. But I made it clear by sharing my own record of writing that they wanted to keep in mind or keep track of all the writing they were doing, from texting to writing a note to their roommates to putting together a grocery list to any type of writing, both in the classroom and outside of the classroom. So when I asked them to not only share that but also reflect on what they learned, they said, *Oh, I didn't realize I did that much writing.* So I think that that assignment worked nicely to initiate them into a different way to begin to think about writing and to see how ubiquitous writing is in our lives, which sort of set the stage for rethinking writing in general.

I think, too, that there's a kind of understanding of themselves as writers that is similar to what Helen is mentioning about her basic writers as well. So much of what she shared were similar to what my students articulated to me and what I experienced with them.

Ann: I'd like to talk more about this idea of rules because you're both talking about how students come into your classrooms with expectations related to the rules they've encountered before, and the students Jo-Anne describes in her chapter find they are constrained as writers by these writing rules.

Jo-Anne, you explain in your chapter that as you get to know students, you ask them about their dispositions toward writing, and you often get them to discuss what good writing is in their eyes. You argue that when students develop positive dispositions toward writing, they can better carry their writing abilities into new contexts. Thinking about this idea of writing rules, how do each of you see rules or any interaction with rules as affecting how students develop identities as writers?

Jo-Anne: For me, asking students to think, to list rules that they've learned about writing provided them an opportunity to not only share but also question, which I think is part of agency and identity, so I tended, I think, to foster that a bit. Because they, while they know those rules, they did question those rules, so there was an opportunity for them to not only share what they knew about these rules but also question them. And in my chapter, I provide some examples of those rules: *Why should I not use "I"?* or *Why does everything have to be five paragraphs?* So just the idea of being able to question, I think there's an autonomy there rather than just passive, passivity, accepting the rules.

Ann: That makes sense.

Helen: And I think feeling like you know what the rules are supposed to be gives students some kind of structure to hang on to or some confidence, it might be a false confidence, but they have some sense that they know what they're supposed to do. And then when you ask them to expand

on their understanding of those rules, that's a little confusing but I think a necessary step in expanding your ability to write. Martha's chapter had something that I took a note about.

Ann: And you're speaking of the chapter in our collection titled "Encouraging Potential in Liminal Space: Student Writer Reflection" written by Martha Schaffer.

Helen: She talks about "clinging" and "resenting," and she's getting at the same thing there, that you want to cling to something, you might resent the changes that you're being asked to make. I don't want to suggest that students aren't open, but they need something else in place of these things they think are rules in order to be able to do something new. And then there's an ability to gain a different kind of confidence because they're not, they realize that the rules are flexible. And if they can see them in action in their own work and in work that they've read as mentor texts, then they can see what's happening.

But so much of hanging on to rules, I think, is lack of experience with writing. It's not, my basic writers were not incompetent, they were inexperienced. And the more experience they had with what the rules could be and what the rules could bend to become, that made a huge difference. So it's that lack of experience more than the need to cling to something.

Jo-Anne: There's some corroboration for what Helen is stating about students' kind of need for rules from Ashley. In my chapter I share what she wrote at one point about the rules, that, *Yes, we need rules, these rules are there for a good reason*, and she's in that kind of liminal space that Martha's talking about, she's making the transition and clinging in a way to those rules because they provide a kind of security, I think, as she's developing her autonomy as a writer.

Helen: Brian talked also, at the very beginning of his chapter, he talks about the "little blue grammar book."

Ann: Yes this is Brian Carpenter, author of the chapter titled "Linguistic Socialization: More than 'regular talk,' 'paraphrase and stuff.'"

Helen: And how deadly that would have been if it had been the controlling feature of the course he was teaching. He talks about how it would have ruined the entire atmosphere of learning that was taking place. There's this kind of careful line we're trying to walk as we're teaching between helping students' understand that rules exist for reasons, like we do need periods in sentences, but sometimes we don't want them there! We have to allow them to bend and flex so that writing can really be owned by the writer and can offer something new to the reader.

It's an interesting tension. And it's scary. It's scary, for students, because we're asking them to walk that same tightrope, and they're afraid of falling off because we know that in the end what they want is the grade. What we want is some new understandings and some experimentation with writing, and what they're looking at is, *What's my grade going to be at the end of the semester?*

Jo-Anne: I think what we're noticing is our attention to the affective domain. When we talk about confidence and this desire to cling to rules and the sense of security, we're looking at the affective domain as part of the experience of learning to be a writer.

Helen: Well I'm thinking of something that was in my chapter about Frankie and how different her final copy was from the early drafts that she was doing, and the leap that she was able to take when she realized the focus of the essay needed to be different from where she began, and, now that's a huge thing for a writer, and it's terrifying because you've got pages of writing, and all of a sudden you're taking something that was in a little thing in the middle and all of a sudden it becomes the focal point, so you have to change everything that's around it.

For me, all the drafting that they did and the risks they were willing to take to say, *Okay, I'm going to blow this thing up completely and move this piece from page 3 to the first paragraph and then everything else has to change after that.* So all the drafting, it's so important. It's just so important.

Ann: What you're saying, to me, connects really to the importance of fostering students' investment in their writing if, because you mentioned earlier, you're getting students to see, *You can't do it wrong because you can always change it later.* But that's in tension with, *But I want the grade, and sometimes I might want to do things as quickly or as easily as possible to get to the grade,* so that's huge to get them to invest enough to be willing to take it apart and build it up again.

Helen: Well that's where I see the writing workshop model as essential also, because I wasn't standing up in front of the class, quotes around this word, "teaching." Students were, I tried to teach these classes in computer classrooms, so everybody was at a computer, and there were, you know, many, many days where, you know, I might spend ten minutes about talking about something and then the rest of the time, students were working on their own papers, and I was circulating and conferencing, or they were talking to somebody sitting beside them about, *Did you do this? Did you try that?* so that time investment might partially be coming from students actually having time during class to do that work.

Ann: Because you're talking about empowering students to break writing rules, our listeners might be interested to know, what's an unusual writing "rule" you've heard students share, we've heard you mention some of the writing "rules" such as five-paragraph essays, and how does your response to students' sharing of such "rules" relate to the development of writerly identity and agency?

Helen: Now I still remember doing a double take the day someone said, *Every paragraph,* I forget what the number was, *Every paragraph is supposed to have five sentences in it.* And I said, *Really? Really? Well, what would you tell Jimmy Baca then?*

Ann: Author Jimmy Baca, whose piece "Eleven Cents" you assign in your courses.

Helen: You know, if someone would say something like that, we would kind of look back at published writers who clearly don't do that.

Jo-Anne: And talk about why they don't. I like that rule, too, that students share, because after I share an example of a writer who uses, you know, one-sentence paragraphs very effectively, they really are taken by that, and they start, those one-sentences paragraphs start to show up in their writing.

Ann: Thank you both so much for sharing your perspectives. To close, what piece of advice would you give to other teachers hoping to foster in their students a sense of writing identity or the ability to identify as a writer?

Jo-Anne: I feel it's important to treat students as though they are writers and give them what they need as writers: time, ownership, and response. But also to be honest with them about writing and share with them what we've learned about writing over the past fifty-plus years from scholarship and research. And I think kind of pull back the curtain, as Doug does in his chapter.

Ann: And this is Doug Downs, whose chapter is titled "Double Standards and Sunshine: Exploring Expectations for Professional and Student Writing in FYC."

Jo-Anne: And really share how real writers function, whether you're an academic writer, you're writing for the workplace, you know, to be honest about it. And I think maybe also invite inquiry, to ask students to do some research, to do some inquiring about their own writing practices or the practices in their field that they're going into.

Helen: All right, and I'll offer two things. One is to be a writer yourself. That insider knowledge is so deep, and it just, I can think of different conferences I've had with students, and if something isn't working, they need help figuring out what else might work, and if you yourself are a practicing writer, you have lots of ideas.

Something else that goes to the affective domain again, I think teachers need to believe that their students are capable. They sense that, they know if you think they can do something, so, especially with Basic Writing, they may not believe in themselves at all. Somebody has to. So if you can convey that, *Oh yeah, okay, well this didn't work, so let's try this,* and, *Wow, this turned out really well, so let's try this again.* They need somebody to think they can do it because too often they think they can't.

Ann: Thank you both for sharing your perspectives on teaching first-year composition. It's been a pleasure to talk with Jo-Anne Kerr and Helen Sitler. Music on this podcast is by Dan-O at 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.

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