

MTN Ep 9 Transcript

MTN Ep 9 FINAL

[00:00:00.12] ERIN HAGAR: Welcome to Moving the Needle. Casual conversations about ways, big and small, to impact student learning. Brought to you by the Faculty Center for Teaching and learning at the University of Maryland Baltimore. I'm Erin Hagar, let's move the needle.

[00:00:18.46] Welcome to this episode of Moving the Needle. Written assignments can give educators a powerful look into the learning process. Through writing, we can see how students absorb ideas, wrestle with them, and share that new understanding with others. But assessing that writing, oh man, that is such an awesome responsibility layered in complexity. I'm excited to dig deep into this topic today with our guests Dr. Isabell May and James Wright.

[00:00:46.03] Dr. May is an associate professor in the graduate school at the University of Maryland Baltimore where she's also the Program Director for the Science Communication Program. Professor May is also the director of the Writing Center.

[00:00:57.82] She recently co-authored a chapter for a collection of essays titled Teaching Writing in the Health Professions that will come out in 2022. A native of Germany, Dr. May identifies herself as a multilingual writer and uses that experience to inform her approach to teaching writing and evaluating student work.

[00:01:17.01] James Wright is the Assistant Director and Multilingual Writing Specialist at the University of Maryland Baltimore's Writing Center where he collaborates with peer consultants, faculty, staff, and students on writing pedagogy, curriculum development, faculty development, and Writing Center practices.

[00:01:33.45] His doctoral research draws on identity, critical race theory, critical whiteness studies, sociolinguistics, and labor theories of language to engage translating quality, anti-racism, and anti oppression in the teaching and learning of writing.

[00:01:47.70] During our conversation, we'll explore the current scholarship in writing studies that addresses linguistic diversity and standards of English as well as some concrete assessment strategies faculty might consider in their courses. We're excited for this conversation and we hope you enjoy it. Let's dive in.

[00:02:04.17] Isabell and James welcome to Moving the Needle.

[00:02:07.11] ISABELL MAY: Our pleasure, Erin. Thanks for asking us here.

[00:02:09.24] JAMES WRIGHT: Thanks for having us.

[00:02:10.66] ERIN HAGAR: Well, we're so excited this is such an important topic. I can't wait to explore it with the two of you. Isabell, let's start with you. Could you just tell us briefly how you came to your current role as Director of the Writing Center at University of Maryland Baltimore?

[00:02:24.03] ISABELL MAY: So I started at the University of Maryland Baltimore in February of 2017 which seems a long time ago. And I came from another institution in our system and my position was created and the official title at the time was Faculty Director of the Writing Center. And

so a large responsibility of that position was overseeing directing the Writing Center, but there was another piece there where I was hired, at the time, lecturer in the graduate school for the science communication program.

[00:02:55.80] Since then, the graduate school has adopted official, or traditional, faculty roles. So I have since been promoted to Associate Professor in the graduate school. And I also started directing the science communication program and also directing the Writing Center. So I wear a few different hats on this campus which is really exciting.

[00:03:13.62] ERIN HAGAR: Well, one of your first colleagues to join you at the Writing Center was a position titled Multilingual Writing Specialist. Can you tell us a little bit about how that position came to be? How it was envisioned? And the rationale behind it.

[00:03:31.29] ISABELL MAY: You know, that's a great question, Erin and I love talking about this and I do need to give credit where credit is due. And when I started in February of 2017, that position was already in the work. So my predecessors and the deans and the provost folks and the provost office had already thought this through. So I inherited a great start. And so there's two major reasons why this position was created.

[00:03:55.08] Number one is that in the Writing Center, we have seen a lot of our clients, and I say clients because we serve not just students, we also serve postdocs, faculty, staff, community members, everybody is affiliated with University of Maryland Baltimore with UMB. So we serve a broad variety of clients.

[00:04:13.57] And we've seen a lot of clients come and I want to say about close to 50%, if not a little bit more than 50% of our clients, tend to be writers with multilingual backgrounds. And just about the term multilingual that many of some of our listeners might not be as familiar with, we now use the term multilingual instead of second language learner or English as a Second Language the acronym for that is ESL because multilingual is a more inclusive term than second language learner. It really-- and it's more of a term on a spectrum.

[00:04:43.45] So we understand language learning now as a spectrum. It's not like native language versus non-native language, but we all, I think in a way, language learners. And we're certainly all our language learners of academic English because I don't think anybody is born knowing how to read, speak, and write academic English. So the move towards multilingual instead of second language learner is a really important one.

[00:05:05.71] So we've seen a lot of multilingual learners come to our center either self referred or referred by faculty, friends, staff, whomever. And so we wanted to honor that and really hire and develop a position and hire somebody who can focus on developing programs and policies for this population. And train our consultants with develop certain sensitivities around working with such a diverse population. So that's one reason why we created this position.

[00:05:33.69] The second one is that a lot of my faculty colleagues and this happened to my predecessor as well as to myself would often approach us in the Writing Center and ask for support to help students who can't write English very well or their grammar isn't good enough or can you help us fix their English?

[00:05:52.95] And I'm not disparaging these comments, I appreciate when faculty come to us and express themselves in the language they have available. But we have a lot of research available to us now that we know that fixing somebody's English isn't the solution. And I know James is going to talk more about this because he's really the expert in this.

[00:06:09.13] But we realized that we also needed to do some education, not just for-- well, we did do some work not just for our state and for our clients, but also for our faculty to work with particularly the students of multilingual backgrounds and to really have somebody on campus who can advocate for us multilingual learners. And I identify as a multilingual learner myself of English. My first language is a German and Slovak. I was born and raised in Germany. So English is not even my second language. So ESL would never apply to me in the first place.

[00:06:41.66] So again, those two reasons, developing programs and policies to work with multilingual writers as well as having somebody on campus who can help us advocate on behalf of us multilingual folks both with faculty and administration. Those were the key rationales for this position.

[00:07:00.32] ERIN HAGAR: Yeah, that's great that's so helpful by way of context. And so, James, you saw this position posted. Tell us a little bit about your background and what drew you to apply and join us here at UMB.

[00:07:16.48] JAMES WRIGHT: Well, one of the things that has always fascinated me has been working in collaboration with folks who are concerned about the ways in which language gets taken up and used, perceived, in the Academy and beyond the Academy. So when I saw the post and I had the interview, I knew immediately that this was going to be a position that was going to be wide open for bringing to the graduate level, especially Health and Human Services and Sciences here at UMB.

[00:07:48.84] The ongoing, and I want to emphasize this, the ongoing deliberations around how we approach the teaching in the classroom of multilingual writers, welcoming and understanding ourselves in the act of making language and meaning in the sciences, in the social sciences, beyond that in our communities and trying to understand exactly how all of these parts connect.

[00:08:14.11] Isabell mentioned linguistic dimension. She mentioned an advocacy dimension. She mentioned a social justice dimension. So these positions, that are now called Multilingual Writing Specialists, kind of evolved out of deliberations and challenges that are already occurring in English as a second language disciplinary circles.

[00:08:34.93] And so it's moved much beyond some of the more structural ways of looking at language, for example, as if making good clear language means just weaving together units and pieces of language out of context. But Isabell mentioned all these multiple contexts that are involved. That's right up my alley and that's what I've been interested in. That's the life I've lived in multiple countries and cultures and at home as well with my family.

[00:09:03.08] And so it reaches me on multiple levels. And you can see too what's exciting about the position. And this, I think, is reflected in a lot of multilingual writing specialist positions, not all, but many. It's developed alongside writing centers as writing centers move closer to the core of the curriculum. You heard Isabell talk a lot about how we're working with faculty. This has evolved beyond kind of-- and I do a lot of this work too. The one on one with language learners in consultation over their writing.

[00:09:34.57] But it's evolved much beyond that to extensive and rigorous training of the consultants that work with us and for us and with the writers to faculty, to faculty programs in terms of admissions in terms of foundational writing experiences for their first year students across campus.

[00:09:52.28] For example, I've worked a lot with the Master's of Public Health program. Isabell and I have worked with the nursing school and many other programs. And we continue to develop and

enrich those relationships. And when I interviewed and when I saw the post, I could tell from the way that it was worded this was going to be that kind of position. And so I could not turn that down.

[00:10:12.22] ERIN HAGAR: Well, lucky for us that you didn't. Tell us a little bit about how your position, Multilingual Writing Specialist, was received by faculty when you first started and how that's evolved over these last few years.

[00:10:26.78] JAMES WRIGHT: That's a great question and a very important one. First of all, I think Isabell alluded to this. Faculty are deeply committed to their students, I've noticed here on campus. They're interested in the teaching of writing. They're interested in mentorship of graduate students on multiple different levels and multiple different contexts.

[00:10:46.91] For example, I know that we have programs that are beginning to take shape around teaching assistantship or graduate assistantships to bring students into the classroom to collaborate with faculty. That's been a recent development, didn't have as much to do with my position, but I think it has to do with a greater understanding since graduate assistants work a lot with writers. The importance of writing. Nursing school, for example, has had writing help over in their Academic Center. The law school has its own Writing Center. We're all collaborating and communicating.

[00:11:17.03] In response to faculty concerns about how to shift pedagogy, both conceptually but also in everyday practice, toward more understanding of multiple different linguistic repertoires that are showing up in all of the diversity that UMB is experiencing at this time.

[00:11:36.98] So as more and more students come into the classroom and they present multiple different kinds of English, multiple different strategies for combining multiple languages, how do we honor those repertoires? How do we hold ourselves answerable as well to the fact that many of these students represent the global norm?

[00:11:55.43] You can look this up. The statistics are clear that most users of English are now using English as a second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth language. And so much of this diversity we see reflects that code meshing, the translanguaging thing we call it. Bunch of fancy words for the different ways that people take their linguistic repertoires, put them together and communicate, and do so beautifully and very clearly. And reflect the linguistic facts of life.

[00:12:23.21] I'm drawing on a scholar named Lippi-Green who talks about the fact that languages are constantly changing, that language is-- that grammatically is not the same thing as clarity and communicative. So how do we respond to that in the classroom? And so that's how I've entered into dialogue with faculty. And, for example, in the public health program with Dr. St George, we have really developed a relationship over time.

[00:12:51.11] It is definitely a work in progress, and she'll tell you the same thing if you talk to her about this, it takes time to develop a-- to become in sync because so many programs use specific genres. They're talking to specific audiences. They have to practice certain practices in order to communicate in terms, not of just publishing, but have actually doing public health work out in the world.

[00:13:12.84] And so we've really spent a lot of time hashing out differences and coming to collaborative compromises about what students need and want to learn. And it's been a beautiful experience.

[00:13:26.39] ERIN HAGAR: Well let's talk a little bit about the faculty response as they notice over time this increasing linguistic diversity. What is some of your experience, both you and Isabell.

[00:13:40.97] ISABELL MAY: You know, like with anything else in life, responses are very varied. Very varied sounds weird, but they're varied, and rightfully so. Everybody comes from a different place in terms of experience around language learning and so on.

[00:13:54.89] I think the most common response and most, I would say consistent response that we tend to get, is some concern and worry about that, if we focus on different types of Englishes that we're not really teaching our students what some people have referred to me as industry standards of English or industry level standards of writing.

[00:14:20.12] I'm thinking of some of our doctoral students in our GPILS Program and GPILS is our acronym for our Graduate Program in the Life Sciences. So folks who are getting degrees in biochemistry, neuroscience, and so on, that they are not-- that if we don't focus on the standards that they're expected to perform at, in terms of publication, if we don't emphasize those, that we're not preparing our students well for their future careers.

[00:14:48.17] And there are a variety of responses to this, especially from our colleagues who have done a lot of work on anti-racist writing assessment and social justice oriented teaching of writing predominantly at the undergraduate level, but also more and more at the graduate level.

[00:15:04.23] And I think our response is often sort of like, well, let's unpack that. Let's unpack what we mean by standards. And I think what happens in those situations, Erin, is that we need to have some really uncommon-- or we have to have situations that will make people-- we will need to have conversations there and with folks that will make people uncomfortable. And especially people like me, I identify as a white, cisgender woman.

[00:15:30.15] So I think a lot of other white faculty might be uncomfortable with this because we do have to talk about white supremacy as it shows up in standards of writing. There is no way around it and scholars, like Asao Inoue, Baker Bell I'm blanking on her first name, James.

[00:15:46.28] JAMES WRIGHT: Yeah, April Baker Bell.

[00:15:47.39] ISABELL MAY: April Baker-Bell. And a variety of other particularly Black, indigenous, and people of color. The acronym we use often or has been used lately as BIPOC scholars. So Black Indigenous People of Color, BIPOC scholars have pointed out for, gosh decades probably if not longer, that white supremacist practices show up in everything that we do in our culture. And so they show up in our rubrics. They show up in the way that we write introductions, discussion sections, reports, systematic reviews, whatever those genres are.

[00:16:21.01] So the goal is not to completely, and I think that's the fear I think that's some faculty might have that we're going to stop teaching students how to produce these texts, but we do-- I think we need to do a variety-- and I think this approach of really looking at it from an anti-racist lens is to-- we can actually--

[00:16:42.00] We have an opportunity to actually really teach these things and also look at and investigate, what is the history behind those genres? Because let's face it, if you look at, especially in our context at UMB Medicine, let's just use an example. There have been a lot of very racist and exclusionary practices and discriminatory practices in medicine.

[00:17:00.78] And I think we're all unpacking those. And institution's unpacking them which is fantastic. So let's unpack them in our writing classrooms or in our classrooms that use writing as well. And there are lots of great approaches and practices that we can do that by even including our students because the students don't come to us as a tabula rasa, as you know like we don't know anything, please fill me, I have to bring no prior knowledge.

[00:17:25.05] On the contrary, they bring a lot of knowledge, especially for students of diverse backgrounds of who have had a different very varied experiences throughout their lives. Let's listen to them and find out where they're coming from and then supporting them and getting to places where they can make conscious and well-informed decisions about the standards they want to continue using or maybe why they, at some point, don't want to use them.

[00:17:51.36] ERIN HAGAR: Yeah, so there are two things that I really take away from your response, Isabell, and then I'd love to hear from James on this too. But the first is that the intentions of so many faculty member that you work with are coming from a place of wanting to support their students and help them succeed, right?

[00:18:11.00] So this commitment to, what we would call standard English or industry standards those kinds of things, are coming from, wanting to make sure that their students advance in the field.

[00:18:23.27] And what I'm hearing you say is it's time to question where those standards come from, not to hold our students back or to put them at a disadvantage, but rather to help all of us unpack where they came from in the first place. And move the whole field forward, move the whole--

[00:18:44.24] ISABELL MAY: Well put, Erin. And if I may add to that, I think at the same time, it's also an opportunity to actually really educate our students around the genres because I think what faculty, who are content experts in their fields, often don't realize or forget, and I'm the same. I'm raising my hand right here, guilty as charged any time. Well, we often forget some of the basics like, well don't students know what a good introduction should look like? What should go in a results section?

[00:19:10.70] They're reading them all the time. Yeah, they're reading them all the time. They're usually skimming them because they have a boatload of those to read. It's certainly what I did when I was in grad school. Now so much on these students plates. So, yes, they're absorbing them and they are exposed to them, but they're rarely taken through it systematically in a repeated way that they can really understand.

[00:19:29.34] So what are some of the genre conventions like an introduction section for a typical research manuscript? You have to, for example, I teach this in my course, look at the research gap. That's an important, rhetorical move we call it in our field. A common way that authors, and many authors have internalized this, if they're successful, published authors, they have totally internalized this.

[00:19:50.12] They probably couldn't even articulate it. They're like, oh, yeah don't you know how to do this? And so they're often not teaching it, not because they don't want the students to know, they don't realize what they know, but their students don't know. If that makes any sense.

[00:20:05.51] ERIN HAGAR: Absolutely. James, tell us how you're responding to this and what you're thinking about.

[00:20:10.91] JAMES WRIGHT: Absolutely and I think the notion of working with students through rhetorical analysis is such an important genre for teaching, especially in that, when we look at the history of the different kinds of writing that we do in all the different disciplines, we rarely, as Isabell said, think about the histories behind it, how they've developed, what they developed for. They have meaning, they have purpose.

[00:20:35.12] And importantly, just like all languages, just like all of us who are working with many different linguistic repertoires across now social media channels and so forth our daily lives, that are

so hybridizing, so complex. Genres change and it makes room for us to recognize opportunities for innovation.

[00:20:54.38] When we talk about some of our efforts on campus around interprofessional education, for example, interprofessional education at its heart is all about figuring out ways to improve the health of society around us by learning to communicate across genres, across disciplinary languages, across discourses, in order to meet the needs of very diverse patients and very complex, pathological challenges and epidemiological challenges. I think the pandemic has really shown us a lot about that.

[00:21:28.61] And it's important too to remember that some of these changes and shifts practically speaking in a classroom, yes they involve explicit discussions about the ways in which standard English has been taken up as a tool. Any language can be taken up as a tool for positioning certain groups of people for social power and political power, which is what's happened with standardized English, in terms of the history of the Academy, in terms of the history of our country.

[00:21:54.11] And as we wrestle with all kinds of reckonings at this point, but especially racial reckonings, it's important to recognize how our insistence and the way that we perceive writers is tied up with colonialism and white supremacy culture. And doing that doesn't necessarily mean that we have to have these all the time explicit conversations. They have to be in tandem with actual practical practices that Isabell was speaking of.

[00:22:21.56] I'll give you an example. At one point Isabell when I were working with a group of nursing faculty a few years ago and a nursing faculty member said, you know well, this is hard. I don't know how to do a lot of this stuff, James. I I'm not a linguist. I'm not trained in education. I have a degree in my specific field. I'm going to need some development on this, and showed a lot of willingness to learn more about it.

[00:22:44.85] And that's what we should do as faculty, is to have constant improvement through self-reflection and practice learning different practices from the research. But she said, and this is what clued me into it, I asked, I said, well, what do you do when you look at student writing? And she said, well, I do what I think I know best, I look at grammar.

[00:23:03.79] And so she would go through and she felt like it was her obligation, as Isabell so wonderfully explained earlier, her obligation to help students to move forward by pointing out every single, what she perceived as grammatical mistake. And the research-- and I shared with her some of the research.

[00:23:19.96] Well one of the issues with that is that can actually prevent or discourage students from engaging in learning more about the standardized language practices that may be expected in the classroom and in the discipline. Because where do you start when the page is just full of marks?

[00:23:38.11] And some faculty were kind of like, well, that's what the publishing experience is like. And, yes sometimes it is and Isabell and I are talking about is also not just changing the classroom ecology, but changing the ecology of programs, curricula and the publishing industry to come to more of an awareness of the labor that's involved in doing all of this. And we'll get to that in a second.

[00:23:59.72] But as I had this conversation with the faculty member, I said, well, research seems to show us that if you look for patterns that you're concerned about that are unfamiliar to you and you ask questions about those, what's the story of those patterns? Just choose a few of them. It's our classroom. One classroom, my classroom is only one side among many, many, many, many, many where the students are going to learn to do these things.

[00:24:23.59] And where they're going to show us where their linguistic repertoire can facilitate innovation. So I ask her, I said, well, you know so what would happen if you found out from the student you that feedback became a dialogue with the student?

[00:24:37.78] To learn more about where the student came up with these different choices. And the faculty member thought about it. And I said, if you choose a couple of patterns, research shows that it's much more manageable for students. They're more likely to take up that conversation with you.

[00:24:52.09] And that, to me, reflects more of the revision process that's involved in publishing. We do respond to publishers and editors when they leave us comments. That is part of the disciplinary activity of our fields if we want to have careers in publishing.

[00:25:08.53] When we go into the public and we negotiate with patients or we negotiate with clients, we still have to listen to them. We still have to ask questions about what is meant when folks are saying certain things and how can we adjust both our speech and our written language in order to reach the best possible conclusion.

[00:25:25.52] So it all connects and it all is revolving around opening our ears and eyes more to recognizing that students aren't just making errors as we perceive them. But they're human beings who are drawing on repertoires and long histories of education from so many different backgrounds, that once we hear those stories, once we acknowledge that labor, students are much more likely to respond to our work with them.

[00:25:53.59] And to develop further as writers in many different directions, not as just folks who are just going to repeat back what we think are standard, unitary patterns of standardized English. But are actually going to be those critical writers that Isabell was speaking about, critically reflective writers, that Isabell was talking about. And we as faculty then too also learn about how these things come about in multilingual folks' lives.

[00:26:18.51] ERIN HAGAR: Yeah. I'd like to dive in and explore a little bit how this looks from the student side. And you have a very unique perspective because students come to you in the Writing Center and maybe they're bringing a paper that has been evaluated by a professor using some of these standardized rubrics, a standardized mindset. And they come to you and they say, OK I'm getting this feedback on my writing.

[00:26:48.27] And I just wonder if you could talk us through the process of how you would work with that student. What you would say to them, and what you notice-- what's the impact that the student experiences when their linguistic diversity comes up against these standards.

[00:27:07.02] JAMES WRIGHT: That's such a great question, and I think it's one that a lot of folks, a lot of faculty, we work with bring this question up as well because they're so concerned about their students. And it's something that goes on frequently in the discipline. We deliberate this all the time. In the Writing Center here and other writing centers where I worked over the years, students come in feeling as though they are deficient. They're often sent to writing centers they don't voluntarily come.

[00:27:35.37] By sent, I mean they're either explicitly or implicitly challenged to come to the Writing Center out of fear, out of possible failure. And failure for many students, especially students who are racialized and minoritized and marginalized, are worried about failing not just in the eyes of the Academy, but the eyes of their community, the eyes of society, especially in a society that consistently racialized them and casts their particular linguistic practices and cultural practices as deficient or inappropriate for academic knowledge production.

[00:28:07.12] So they come in with this and my job is to find out the story. And I'll ask them, so tell me more about the feedback. They'll say to me, well I'm a terrible writer. My teacher said I need to come work with you, or, it was implied through the syllabus,

[00:28:21.40] I need to come work with you or I got a certain grade on the paper that the feedback suggested I come talk to you. And so we'll sit down and we'll talk about that. And come to find out they've had this long history of feedback that can be uneven, inconsistent.

[00:28:40.68] Often one classroom and faculty will use particular language around feedback. Another classroom will use a very different one. Everybody seems to use flow and grammar and we think we know what we mean when we're talking about those things, but they can mean very different things depending on the discipline, the class, the content, and the audiences, and the purposes for the writing. So we unpack all of this.

[00:29:03.75] And I point out, very clearly as we do that, is that even though the student may feel like they're not meeting the standard and they've had that communicated to them in multiple ways across the academy and across the institutions and across society in many ways, they belong here. They were admitted to the school. They took the tests. They were admitted by admissions committees. They were vetted and admitted and they belong here.

[00:29:32.73] It's also when they come up against these standards and feel like they've lost a lot of hope, I very clearly communicate to them that these things can be learned. Writing can be learned, but it cannot be learned in a situation where we assume that the learning is politically neutral. Their labor and what they have come up against in order to be in this Academy needs to be acknowledged and it needs to be acknowledged in writing assessment.

[00:30:00.06] It needs to be acknowledged and the teaching of writing, because at the very foundation of their survivors has been the languages that they use. It's not just that their identities are wrapped up and connected to all of this. It's also that they have done work and they have arrived and they deserve to arrive fully.

[00:30:18.21] And so we unpack this kinds of things. And I work with students for example like and these are composite, drawn from many, many different moments with students. But students who get a lot of grammar supposed errors marked on their papers.

[00:30:33.70] But then we look at the rubric together and the rubric only designates maybe three points out of all the points available for grammar for standard grammar that matches say the APA guidelines. And so the student becomes confused since there's an oversized marking of grammar on the draft and the feedback seems to spend so much time on, for example, how well the student uses articles or not, but the rubric only grants a certain number of points to that. The student is confused.

[00:30:59.94] Well, it looks like I did everything else really well or up to par at least, but then there's this problem with grammar. Why are there so many comments about that? So the students can get really confused.

[00:31:10.44] And so I think it's really important from the student's perspective for us faculty members and educators to pay attention to that and to come up with strategies that mitigate that confusion to get on the same page about some strategies and tricks and practices that we can use to more justly approach providing feedback to students that doesn't discourage, but that does what we want it to do.

[00:31:37.46] Look, we're not reviewer number two. We're not we're not that we're not here to necessarily scrutinize everything in every situation a student does in every classroom. Our job is to

collaborate among classes, among faculty, to make each site a moment where we can move the needle, was going to do it, a little bit so that the students can gradually learn over time.

[00:31:58.99] But the root of it is they are not deficient as human beings. Their language practices are not deficient. They will take up standardized English as plural, nursing Englishes, social work writing Englishes, legal writing Englishes. And they will learn to use those.

[00:32:16.64] And the difficult and most challenging thing for us to recognize too, and I do this with students, I have open conversations. And these are not what just students, but postdocs, colleagues, that even though students who are racialized and marginalized pick up and use these different English as to position themselves as writers in a discourse, it doesn't get rid of racism. White supremacy culture doesn't disappear and this is the entanglement of the political realities and the racialized-- processes of racialized in our country the realities of these contexts.

[00:32:49.90] They still go out into the world and because of the ways that white listening subjects or audiences view their names, their phenotypes, whatever it may be, still perceive their reading or their writing or their speaking as deficient or inappropriate or informal. Scholars who are writing this research actually talk about this happening to them as they've developed as students as well and researchers.

[00:33:19.18] ISABELL MAY: Yeah it's quite a lot of stories about that. If I may add to this because I wanted-- James mentioned reviewer two and some listeners might not be familiar with this trope or this reviewer two tends to be the sort of-- most folks might be familiar with just in case they aren't.

[00:33:35.89] That most academic manuscripts are reviewed by two reviewers and somehow reviewer two has gotten the reputation as being the tougher one and the meaner one. And I think there's been a statistical analysis of how often reviewer two becomes the mean reviewer and that have shown that reviewer two tends to be more frequently the mean reviewers so just FYI, just adding to that. And I wanted to add to what James was saying as well. Well put.

[00:34:04.38] I've had these situations happening to me and I've also and more frequently I've worked with students who've been in these situations. It's demoralizing and I can speak from my own personal experience. I don't think that the faculty who put me in this position when I was a student meant to be harmful. Actually, I think they actually meant to be helpful.

[00:34:26.35] They really wanted to support me and help me become a better writer or more effective writer. And so we often unknowingly do harm to each other and to our students or harm is done to us as well unknowingly by the perpetrator in these situations.

[00:34:43.04] So I think we need to really move the needle on that for sure that we're becoming more aware of how some of these practices that, for so long in the academic communities in academia have become standard and normal, are really harmful and have been harmful to a lot of people for a long time. But certainly now it's these reckonings that James mentioned have brought them to the surface.

[00:35:06.91] And in my courses that I teach in a science communication program, I talk a lot about quote unquote standards, or conventions. I'd like to call them conventions because it implies a little bit more flexibility than a standard even though sometimes the word standard even comes into my language, what can I say? We're not perfect, right?

[00:35:25.21] But these, I talk about these conventions in research writing. And I try to be very transparent in both my written communication and my video communication. The class I teach are mostly asynchronous. So I don't interact with my students via Zoom or in the classroom.

[00:35:41.69] So I try to be very clear about my own biases like, for example, I don't like when people start a sentence with though because I think although is the better term, it's more formal. However, I've seen plenty of published articles with though is used instead of although. So I say like listen in my experience to my ear or my eyes, this looks or sounds better. But that's just-- keep in mind that's my own bias.

[00:36:08.45] And I think that developing that sensitivity is really important because I've seen a lot of my colleagues and I've worked with faculty not here, at other institutions, who would use, and I use the phrase myself when I started grading papers of students back when I was a grad student, I used the phrase awkward a lot. I would write awkward-- and this was still when I got paper submissions.

[00:36:28.69] And what the heck does that mean? You know, awkward, like jeez a lot of things are awkward. And I've learned over time that, and usually my instinct is a good one. Something isn't-- I'm not getting something you as the reader.

[00:36:40.88] So as I just phrase that, I have to pull back and be like, OK, as a reader right now, what am I not getting from the text what the writer is presenting to me? And then I can engage with the writer in a conversation. I can ask questions. I'm thinking you mean this or do you mean this? I'm not quite getting the connection between this or that.

[00:37:00.80] It sounds like it's more laborious, so I really pick my battles when I go through it when I work with student papers. But I think that those moments from the student's perspective, because I've been on the receiving end of comments like this as well, are so much more useful for growth and for learning than just marking everything as much as possible, but just with short little pithy remarks like awkward flow.

[00:37:25.91] And I explain what I mean by flow very clearly to my students. We talk about paragraph structure and it takes me a long time to explain it. So just adding those marginal comments on the side, students and writers need more context than that from us as evaluators.

[00:37:41.66] ERIN HAGAR: That's so important and it's so-- what I love about this is because I feel like we're transitioning now into some concrete strategies that faculty members who might be listening who are saying, OK I appreciate, this I understand this mindset, I understand the slippery slope when we start talking about standards and standardized writing, but I have been brought up in this system, I have been trained in these ways myself.

[00:38:08.90] And so it is very hard to separate yourself in the act of teaching, of evaluating, of providing comments on written work. And so this idea of changing this-- I almost saw when you were describing the awkward, Isabell, just like a stamp that just gets stamped right on there. And it's such a judgment. There's nothing there, but what I heard in your approach is really changing that to more of a conversation even though it's an asynchronous, distant conversation.

[00:38:41.51] But it's you when you're reading, writing to the writer, and then the writer receiving that after you've read. It's not a real time conversation, but it invites just a thoughtfulness to, oh, what am I trying to say here? Or, why didn't this land with this particular reader?

[00:38:58.76] And it individualizes it rather than making some grand proclamation that the Academy sees this as awkward. It's, I, Isabell, as your instructor, am trying to figure out what you mean here. Can you help me out a little bit. Does that-- is that the feeling that you're going for is that--

[00:39:18.92] ISABELL MAY: Absolutely. I think that's really well put, Erin. And it has a lot to do-- and you know the irony I always find is when I talk with faculty like, oh I don't know how to approach.

And struggling rightfully because they have been brought up. We've all been up in a system-- brought up in a system that has this pithy remarks that's been standard for a long time.

[00:39:38.16] And so I get that people use that as their toolbox, they have nothing else in there. So we really are proposing that there's a plethora of tools out there. There's a big toolbox out there and it's been out there and it's been used and it works really well.

[00:39:53.46] So let's take a look at it. And one of them is the sort of from their leader's perspective, which is how James trains our consultants. That is what our consultants-- I mean that is their second nature is the leaders had. And that's how when I do peer review in my courses, I tell students when they review their peers writing I said, come from a perspective as a reader and it's amazing.

[00:40:13.07] I just reviewed a few months-- a few weeks ago some assignments on my students. And I think everybody at some point in the site [? comment ?] said, as a reader, I'm struggling with what you're saying. And I thought, that's exactly what I tell them. [INAUDIBLE] they copied me like, yay, excellent. That's what they should do. And so I think it leads to a conversation around, James mentioned earlier, really foregrounding the labor because I think when we're engaging with our students or with a student writers around what are they meaning here?

[00:40:46.40] We're recognizing the labor that goes into what they put in there. And I think sometimes as faculty we have the tendency, because we're stressed out, we have a lot on our plate, it's like everybody in the world, I get it, it's not an easy life at times. And so we get to this place where we feel like, oh I don't think my students put a lot of work into this. And they might or they might not. I don't know. I wasn't there.

[00:41:09.66] But in most cases I have found, students have put work into their writing. Even though it might not look to me like it's a first draft. And the first draft, my first draft, are not something to write home to anybody about because they're my first and even my second drafts at time because I'm still experimenting and I'm allowing myself to mess up. So I wish we would give-- I think giving our students that grace is important.

[00:41:33.39] And so the other suggestion I have for a lot of faculty is to really take a look at the syllabus and look at the right assignments. And it might seem like it's a lot of work to do first to do drafts or allow students to revise something more frequently throughout the semester because you're like, oh my God, I got to add another writing assignment to my grading repertoire.

[00:41:54.93] But what I can say in my own experience and experience with lots of faculty I work with over the years is that, when we do that and we just try it with one or two assignments and give students the opportunity to revise again, and we focus our feedback on the we call them higher level [INAUDIBLE] it's a kind of a weird language to put around it.

[00:42:14.58] But basically we don't focus on the grammar and where's the article and awkward or whatever, but we engage with the text and the writer. And we do that for just not for everything that the writer is writing, but for a few select moments.

[00:42:27.66] It actually reduces our time in grading and ultimately-- oh, and giving feedback and it really gives-- it's a better experience overall both and for faculty and I think for students as well. So that's another strategy that I suggest to really be like, hey where could I think of a writing assignment as something not just towards the end the want of time. And not just an outline, but really having students write a page or two of a larger paper early on.

[00:42:56.40] And for students to know it's OK that's not perfect, but then give feedback just like a reviewer would. We all know as faculty when we publish, as researchers ourselves, the review of

feedback can be brutal and it's a lot. And working-- you know walking through that can be tough. And so it is usually feedback that is focused on the content.

[00:43:18.54] I mean, there are always comments about language whatever it's another conversation we can have another time. But in most cases, feedback we get from our reviewers is very much focused on what we would call flow, but they're asking very specific questions. So let's do that for students as well.

[00:43:35.87] ERIN HAGAR: Another area that I'd love to talk about in terms of the toolbox, and I see this a lot in my work supporting faculty with their online courses, comes in the rubrics for writing assignments. And typically what I see is a rubric that's been designed with three or four criteria that are specific to the learning outcomes of a particular assignment, writing assignment.

[00:44:00.16] And then there's always that last 10% or 15% section of the rubric that has to do with mechanics, grammar, style, APA, all of those things. So, James can you tell us a little bit about how you see the inclusion or exclusion of that component of a rubric fitting into this approach?

[00:44:20.11] JAMES WRIGHT: Sure, I think it's important. And I think you alluded to this, Erin. And I think Isabell did earlier too that rubrics, as well as writing assignments and their connections to objectives and so forth, are part of the entire ecology of a course. They're connected to the entire ecology of a program, which is connected in turn to an ecology, a much broader ecology, for an entire discipline or profession.

[00:44:44.12] And so I think we have to look at all of those different structures across different scales to figure out exactly what we're asking students to do. That's the first thing I recommend. So being aware of how a rubric may align or misalign with some of the goals and commitments of particular professions. Right now, there's a lot of discussion around diversity, equity, and inclusion in terms of cultural competency and so forth.

[00:45:06.86] I know that our diversity Action Council has a cultural competency statement on their web page. How does that rubric, particularly that section you were discussing, Erin, how does that connect to our commitments to greater equity and justice in the Academy and beyond the Academy into the professions we're training folks to enter?

[00:45:28.75] So if we take a very standard structural approach, a very prescriptive approach to that particular aspect of the work that students are doing, often we're asking them to meet a standard or a convention without unpacking the labor they've gone through to get there.

[00:45:45.62] So this overt focus on quality and writing, in terms of rubric grading and assessment, can often, while we think it's doing a lot to help students unpack exactly what they need to do, often what it does is obscure what they're doing and erase sometimes what they're doing.

[00:46:03.64] And just stamp it with that convention and say, you have to meet that particular, you have to check that box, which is, I think, something we're really trying to avoid in terms of equity, inclusion, diversity, justice, and so forth.

[00:46:17.09] So what I've often-- it depends on the kind of writing. It depends on what the students-- and this is an important part. Asao Inoue, Mya Poe, Baker-- April Baker-Bell, many, many, many other scholars. Jonathan Flores and-- sorry Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores, others who do this work, talk about taking a look at ourselves first, understanding ourselves as we're dramatizing the reader when we look at these things. And when we set up a rubric, we're also dramatizing ourselves as readers.

[00:46:45.76] As a reader, what do I want to see in the language for this particular kind of writing? There may be particular kinds of moves, rhetorical moves, structures, organization, where and how a paragraph is set up that are expected. But then there also may be moments where things can be innovated. And I think leaving that space open in the rubric in every section for innovation is very important.

[00:47:11.18] So what I work with faculty to talk about is where in this particular kind of writing can innovation be part of what we're looking at as we dramatize ourselves as readers who ostensibly are folks in the discipline who are looking at the students practice writing. Because, let's face it, to assay means to give an attempt, to make an attempt.

[00:47:32.53] So as a student's making an attempt, we recognize this as an attempt and not a polished product. And we look at these particular sections about where does linguistic innovation happen? Where does the student actually pay attention carefully to the particulars of the American Psychological Association's section on gender inclusive language? And they use the singular they instead of the old standard he or she. And why? Does the student know why?

[00:48:03.70] And I think we're getting to that point too. It's part of developing the rubric is trying to picture ways to get students of talking about those choices. If they're going to make particular innovative choices where they see them as innovative, what's the story behind it? Can they talk about it?

[00:48:18.46] And that's when we get to the point where critically minded writers are coming out of our classrooms. And it forms a tapestry across programs. And each class becomes a site where students are learning to deepen that critical thinking. So that when they get to the reviewer number two, they can explain, if they need to, why they made certain choices

[00:48:37.52] ISABELL MAY: Erin, can I add something? Can I add something on rubrics? Because I've actually-- so you're asking about rubrics. I actually stopped using rubrics and it's a personal decision. So if I've adopted a labor based grading approach in my courses, and I've started using guideline-- or checklists for my paper. It's actually one suggestion that you made, Erin, if I remember correctly. So my students have a checklist of things that should be in the assignment. It's kind of a short version of the longer assignment description.

[00:49:06.65] And I've started using those this past summer and it's been amazing. And it actually, it frees me to really focus on the text and each text rather than trying to figure out the rubric. And again, I've seen rubrics work really well. And I've used rubrics my entire grading life and I think they have a great-- there's great rubrics that one can use. I just decided to do away with them and see where that takes me and I've been really liking it.

[00:49:31.02] And I've also noticed that talking about another tool and faculty tool and faculty toolbox is, when in fact when we assign a certain paper, a certain genre, let's say we assign a genre of a literature review. Then let's give students a sample paper. And I like using, when I teach my courses several times and I do what teach them every year, I have started using students papers from the previous year as an example.

[00:49:58.37] And I've asked a student of course for permission. And I either anonymize it or not whatever their preference is. And on top of that, I started doing this this semester actually, on top of providing this paper, I also recorded a short video explaining why I chose this paper as an example for this genre and what is done really well.

[00:50:18.24] So the students get not just the description, the checklist, they get the sample paper. They also get me talking about, so here this paragraph does a really great transition. In this

paragraph here the author is really doing a great job and including other sources and juxtaposing different arguments. This is a great example for a conclusion. Here's a great thesis statement, whatever those are the compound and said I might use in a particular genre that I ask my students to write.

[00:50:45.95] And I found that extremely useful, especially for those of us who teach online or we can't always have these in class discussions that just erupt, but we can go over these things in greater detail. But to think that student-- need multiple exposures to the content and sample papers are the number, I think, the best thing. And I speak from my own perspective as a student at some point. When I know what something needs to look like, then I can be like, OK how can I emulate that? And then I can start also varying it.

[00:51:15.56] And like I'm learning the scale, like you're doing on the piano, and I want to become a jazz pianist I started experimenting with the scales. But I got to look at a scale first and know why it's there, how to use it. And then I can start also developing a bigger repertoire and also drawing on repertoires that I bring to the table myself.

[00:51:35.45] JAMES WRIGHT: I think that's a really good point too and you know by aligning those different samples students can see where there's so much flexibility within genres there's so much flexibility in different kinds of purposes for writing and quite those out as faculty members we can see that because we've been reading this stuff for a long time point out those differences look this person organized it differently or this person used language and conventions differently than the person who wrote the other paper.

[00:52:01.67] ERIN HAGAR: It sounds like really what you're advocating for is intentionality on both sides, that there's intentionality in the design of the assignment and some deep thinking about what the faculty as reader is hoping to experience. And then also equipping student writers with the tools to know that they're not just doing this as default.

[00:52:22.13] That if they are activating their linguistic superpowers, that they're doing it with knowledge that, I'm doing this and I'm doing it for a particular purpose. Or, if I'm choosing to play the standardized language game, I'm recognizing that I'm doing that and I'm doing it for a particular purpose.

[00:52:42.77] JAMES WRIGHT: Yes, absolutely.

[00:52:43.85] ISABELL MAY: I like the linguistic superpowers. I need to think on that a little bit and play with that.

[00:52:48.71] ERIN HAGAR: Well you guys will get the first capes. And then we'll get a little cape going. This has been such a fantastic discussion. I'm so excited to know you personally and to be able to extend this conversation and to offer it to our listeners. So I cannot thank you enough for taking the time. We will put some links in our description of this episode to some of the scholars that Isabell and James reference, this is a whole field.

[00:53:17.00] We could have probably done this episode for six days and still not tapped into everything that needs to be discussed. But I really do appreciate how you both balance this philosophy and this mindset with concrete, practical tools that faculty, in our specific context of graduate Health and Human Services professional education, can really run with. So thank you, both.

[00:53:42.57] ISABELL MAY: Thanks, Erin, it was a pleasure being here. Bye, everyone.

[00:53:45.33] JAMES WRIGHT: You're welcome, Erin, and thank you so much for having us.

[00:53:48.09] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:53:50.50] ERIN HAGAR (VOICEOVER): Thank you for joining us today on Moving the Needle. Visit us at umaryland.edu/fctl to hear additional episodes, leave us feedback, or suggest future topics. We'd love to hear from you.