

Embodying Professional Writing: “So, I’m Thinking About Getting a Tattoo...”

[slide]

PART 1: INTRO

So, I’m going to be talking about embodiment and professional writing.

[SLIDE]

HEADS UP: THIS IS NEW FOR ME AND A WORK IN PROGRESS

I wouldn’t be surprised if, at the end of my talk, one of you lovely people in the audience is able to raise your hand and say, “well, duh, Katie. This has been talked about over and over by xxx.” I do my best with reading things--but I know I am missing vital parts of the conversation around PW and embodiment/cultural rhetorics. So, I look forward to your kind, collegial feedback after my talk :)

[slide]

PART 2: POSITIONALITY

This talk comes out of the work I’ve been doing trying to pull together strands of scholarship and theory to create a professional writing experience for a specific student population--the undergraduate students at Salem College, the oldest continually operating women’s college in the United States. While many people associate women’s colleges with affluent white women, Salem has been actively recruiting first generation students and students of color for the last decade. As a result, the cohort of first year students that I came in with in 2015 was 60% first gen and/or students of color [is this true?]. We also have a large population of LGBTQ students, and many of the students at Salem do not identify as women.

So, this is where I come in. I am a fat, queer, cis gender, white, middle class woman. I am currently in my second year as the director of the Writing Center and an assistant professor of English at Salem College. My English department is exclusively literature based, while my background is cultural rhetorics and writing center work. With my department chair, last spring I created and proposed a minor in PW for Salem College. It was approved in May of last year, and I started teaching PW classes in the fall.

The question that guides this talk (and all of my work for the last year and a half) is: what should “professional writing” look like at Salem College?

Before you start to zone out, though, thinking that this talk is too specific because it deals with a specialized population of students, I want to tell you why I think this is relevant to a larger college composition and communications audience.

[slide]

1. Professional writing (at Salem, and beyond) is about teaching students to deconstruct systems of power through communication and then build better options in multiple contexts
 - a. Sounds familiar? Useful? Cool, let's keep going.

PART 3: THEORETICAL FRAME

I want to talk about my frame in the context of this broad take-away:

1. Professional writing is about teaching students to deconstruct systems of power and then build better options in multiple contexts

[slide]

- a. This is in line with feminist pedagogy (Haas, Royster and Kirsch, Powell, Pough, many, many more)
- b. One way to do this is by engaging in ideas of embodiment
 - i. Johnson et al (embodied rhetorics)

A quote to help further frame:

As highly relational practices, embodied methodologies and embodiment as a site for study encourages complex relationships among past, present and future. Approaching embodiment through this complex relationship allows for multiple experiences, as a body is never just a race, a class, a gender, a size, etc. [slide] And just as one body must be seen for its multiplicity, so must a body be seen as a conglomerate of intricate layers and forces and parts. Too, just as bodies are always complicated by this conglomerate, so is rhetoric: they are both assembled by their orientations to larger cultural forces just as they are also a result of their own assemblage.

I like this idea because it connects the body and rhetoric in ways that cannot be separated.

I want to make it clear that embodiment and feminist pedagogy aren't separate threads—but this separation is where my brain is right now. Like I said at the beginning: I'm open to kind suggestions about other places/strands to consult, especially in the context of what constitutes "professional" writing :)

Without further ado, I would like to share some snippets of what this has looked like in practice. My hope is that they will reveal the multifaceted-ness of looking at professional writing from an embodied perspective.

[slide]

PART 4: VIGNETTES

HB2

It's the spring of 2016 in North Carolina, and House Bill 2, the "Bathroom Bill" that blocks the rights of almost all people—but LGBTQ people (with an emphasis on the "T")-- has recently been passed. There is a call from faculty and students for the college to issue a public statement against the bill reassuring everyone that the college is a safe space for all people.

The dean of the college (of the entire college, directly under the president in our institutional structure) is a literature professor by trade. She is significantly older than me, thin, and white. She always looks impeccable.

We are meeting today to talk about funding for a writing center event. We make a little bit of small talk as we sit down at her round office table. "I like what you've done with your hair," she tells me. "It seems very much like what the students do with their hair." I've recently cut my hair (how it is now) and dyed it dark purple.

Once we are settled, she smiles at me and pulls out a folder from the padfolio in front of her and removes two pieces of paper. She puts them on the table and slides them across until they are in front of me.

"Do you know what these are?" she asks me.

I look down at the documents: they are print outs of two emails. One is from me, and the other is from my colleague and friend in the sociology department. Both emails are requesting that the college make an official statement condemning HB2.

"Yes," I say. "These are two emails about HB2. It's very important to me, and quite a few other folks, that Salem makes a public statement."

"Tell me about your process writing your email, Katie," the dean says to me in response.

I look at her, a little confused, because I thought we ere here to talk about the writing center.

"Well," I start, turning my head and squinting a little bit, unsure of what exactly she's looking for. "I had been talking with a colleague on Facebook about sending an email to the administration."

She nods, but doesn't say anything.

After a moment she explains, "I ask because the language in the middle paragraphs, here, is almost exactly the same." She points to the same place on each piece of paper. "Doesn't that seem odd to you?"

"Well, no," I begin to respond. "I got it from my colleague in Sociology. She shared it with me on Facebook."

“So you admit that you took someone else’s language?” she asks, a little excited.

“Well, yes,” I start to say, “but...”

She sits back in her chair. “I just worry about your ability to teach students to write professionally, when you take text from someone else in an email and don’t give credit. What does this show them about using sources? About citing information?”

Wait. Is she being serious?

I’m pansexual and polyamorous, but I’m not out to my dean. I can’t help but wonder how she’s reading me. I only use the word “partner” when talking about my significant others. As I mentioned, my hair is half shaved and purple. I have visible tattoos. The writing center has quickly become filled with staff members from the LGBTQ organization. I am a known friend of the trouble makers on campus, and a fierce advocate of the nonbinary/trans students.

“Well,” I begin, and I pause. I’ve been trained for this. I’ve been *trained* for this. What would my mentors say?

This is a moment where I have the chance to teach the administration how to understand what I do. This is a moment where my practice of professional writing cannot be separated from the way I embody my identities.

I know this, but the whole situation still feels ugly to me.

So I tell her, “I mean, sharing language is common in activist communities especially with petitions and mass emails. Notions of ‘plagiarism’ as we understand them in the academy—especially in regards to literature and traditional notions of the “author” don’t really exist outside of the academy. This sharing of language is an accepted practice in professional settings outside of the classroom. And, to answer your question, that is exactly what I will be teaching the students in the professional writing minor.”

She looks at me, and smiles. She takes back both pieces of paper and puts them in her folder.

She straightens her blazer and readjusts her skirt. “Well, I have noted your email request and will send it along to the president, along with the others.”

And then, to signal that the conversation is over, she tells me, “As you know, Katie, the institution has no desire to become co-educational.”

I have a million things I want to say in response, but it’s my first year. I go back to my office and free-write all the questions I would ask her if I were more brave or had tenure. For example:

- How does speaking out to protect trans people connect with being “co-educational”?

- Why on earth is sharing the language of an email petition indication that I am not qualified to teach professional writing?
- What does she think professional writing actually is?
- And finally: Would she be asking me about my writing process for this email if it were about any other topic?

Sammy's tattoo

I'm sitting in my office in the spring of 2016 working on the proposal for the minor in professional writing. I have been talking a lot with my writing center staff and service learning class about this minor, since it will intersect with the work that they are already doing. One of my staff members, who is also my current student, comes into my office and closes the door half way.

"Hey Katie, are you busy?" she asks me.

"Not really, Sammy" I lie to her.

She stands in front of me and fidgets a little bit, tugging at her shirt-sleeve. "Well, okay, cool. I wanted to ask you a question about professional writing." I nod and smile--these conversations usually help me figure out what I'm trying to do. This minor is for the students, after all.

"So, I'm thinking about getting a tattoo," she tells me.

I blink.

She pulls up the sleeve of her sweatshirt. "I've noticed that you have a tattoo here on your arm [indicating to the inside of my left wrist]. I want to get another one, and I want to get it here [indicating her forearm]. I was just wondering, from a professional writing perspective, would this be a good idea? I know how I look is a part of everything and this seems like a professional writing issue."

I'm not gonna lie, I want to jump up and down and hug her.

This is why I am here: to have these conversations with students like Sammy. This is what professional writing will interrogate at Salem College.

"Well," I tell her, smiling like an idiot, "this is all about the rhetorical situation, right? What are the audiences/purposes/contexts that your arms will exist in? When is it safe for you to resist the norm?"

We talk about this a little bit and she decides to wait on the arm tattoo. "I mean, I'm already a curvy Latina woman," she tells me. "I guess I don't need more things working against me right now" she says, laughing a little bit.

I'm not laughing. I agree with her, but it makes me mad.

How will Sammy's body be read when she goes out into the work world? Especially by people like my Dean, who clearly subscribe to conservative notions of what constitutes "professionalism?"

I need to give her the tools to be able to get into places that would traditionally exclude her so that she can make changes when she is in charge.

I'm not sure what to do, so I add language about interrogating notions of "professionalism" and bodies in each of my course descriptions for the minor.

Fast forward to January of 2017. I'm sitting in the chair at my favorite tattoo artist's new studio. She has a stencil of a palm-sized cupcake in her hand.

"So, are you set on where you want to put this?" she asks me.

I have a brief moment of hesitation. I think of Sammy. I can get the cupcake on my forearm. I have a job—a job that allows me to "look like the students" according to my dean.

I can use my body and my appearance to model professionalism ways that challenge the norm.

"Oh definitely," I respond.

[slide]

PART 5: CONCLUSION

So, what does it mean to engage in "professional writing" specifically from an embodied perspective? How can we best serve the students we engage with? How can we continue to teach the institution to understand and value this work?

Just from these two examples, you can see how this is a multifaceted issue. I hope that you see that while these stories are specific to my college, they speak to embodied experiences that have relevance in many places and spaces—both in the academy and beyond.

[slide]

In the Q&A I'm open to suggestions for how we could make visible (while making safe) space for all bodies in the context of professional writing work. Thank you for your time.