Dr. Amy Devitt Interview Transcript

➡️How did you get into the field?

That's a great place to start because I love stories about how people got into what they're doing. I was a traditional English major at my undergraduate, and I wanted to teach. Like lots of people I knew I started into teach college. I went into an MA program in literature and knew that I liked writing about literature, so I started an MA program and started teaching right away. I loved teaching and loved teaching writing and part of the requirement for the program, I came in the summer before and took two courses before I ever started teaching; one of them was "Modern English Grammars," a grammar course in language studies, and one was an introduction to Rhetoric/Composition. I discovered fields I never knew existed. Language Studies? I loved to teach. I decided I wanted to learn to teach writing better and learn the literature of those fields. I loved literature, but I could do that. I could write literature papers off the top of my head. But composition, to me, felt like it seemed to matter. I'm a real '60s child. I wanted to make a difference. Composition was where students needed me and it was where I could make a difference for people. So I started studying composition and English Language. I looked for a PhD program that would let me do both English language and composition. Because to me, English Language and Composition are tied together; I don't think you can separate them. I got my doctorate, so I could do both, and that's where I am.

➡️Was it the possibility of making a difference that dew you to the field, or were there any scholars in the field?

When I started composition was a pretty new field. In my composition studies survey, we had a handful of books—six books—in the field. Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*—that book made a big impact on me—and Ed Hirsch's *Philosophy and Composition*, which I look back on now with a shudder. What I loved about the book was a section he had on grapholect—that there was a written code that was different from an oral code, and that you could study the written version of language and that it was important and interesting and had its own qualities. *Errors and Expectations* was about making a difference in the world. It was mostly about what we call basic writers and seeing their errors made in Standard English as something you could interpret and understand. I ended up specializing in my dissertation in standardization of written English. At Michigan most people I worker with were in English language rather than in composition. English language is not syntactic theory, but how English sentences are structured and the peculiarities, specifically I was interested in sociolinguistics how does language reflect who we are and our identities and dialects, regional and social, as a way of identifying and understanding, which fits very well for me with rhetoric and composition. I got interested in the standardization of language from a Shaughnessy *Errors and Expectations* approach. How did language get to have a right and wrong, and who gets to say what is right and wrong? I got to that out of

Errors and Expectations and Shaughnessy. It reflected my '60s do-gooder notion of who are these people who get to say, and I have felt responsible for students who come out of our programs being able to make choices about how they're going to be received using Standard Edited English and deciding to or not to use SWE, just because they don't have access to it.

➡Do you think that your interest in English has paved the way for the work you have done in genre?

In my dissertation I was looking at the standardization of English. I started looking at Scot's English from 1520-1659. I told my dissertation director I wanted to look at a time when standards were being shaped and formed and do a historical study. And he was really into Scot's English; He's English, and I'm Irish. He said do Scot's English at this time period. Not having any better ideas, I said, "Great. Thank you." So I studied Scot's English, 1520-1659 and the unification that was going on at that time. Scotland was unifying with England and Scot's standards were being shoved aside in place of Anglo English. It was a quantitative study, so I was controlling for variables: audience, medium, and genre. It was just making sure I had a range of things, and nothing funny got in there. But what I was really interested in was: how does this process happen? I just thought I would see how quickly or gradually the change happened.

What I found when during the quantitative study when ran the statistical tests, genre was as significant a variable as time was. I was studying a century and a half when I knew this language change was happening, and time, of course, made a significant difference, because it happened over this time, but genre was as significant. In this same slice of time how far this change had progressed differed significantly whether it was in the records of Privy Council or in official documents, genre made as much of difference as the passage of time. You could take a text from 1520 and from 1659, and find a dramatic difference, and that same difference between one genre and another during the same time. What is this about genre? Why would genre do this? So I had to go in and try to figure out, why would genre do this? What is it? Audience, medium—not significant. But genre—significant.

So I went in to figure out why, and the only explanation I could come up with—there was nothing in literature that I could use in any way that helped—the only explanation I could find, drawing from sociolinguistics, was that the genres were representing different rhetorical contexts. Genre wasn't just a set of forms, because then people would have just followed whatever was the form at the time, you wouldn't have change happening, but instead it was these different rhetorical situations. That in one genre, the difference was that these were people where the Scots' identify was really important, so people were hanging on to the old Scots form, but nobody talked about it. Nobody said, "Oh, when you're writing the records of the Privy Council use Scottish forms. No one said, "Our records of the Privy Council

are Scottish." No one seemed to notice that anything was happening at all. And yet, Scottish identity was all so closely tied to genre that it was exhibiting this change. And people were so closely shifting over to the Anglo English identity that they were moving along faster. They found no evidence that anyone was aware that this was happening at all. So that's how I got to genre. Genre is this rhetorical cool thing where you can see identity and roles for readers and writers, you can see rhetorical situation. And then I eventually started getting more into things like Bitzer's "Rhetorical Situation" to come up with an explanation as to how this might be.

➡️It seems to be a relatively new interest in the field of genre studies, is it because of your work?

The interest [in genre studies] is because of Carolyn Miller's article in 1984. My dissertation was in 1982, and I was searching around for some way to explain this, and I had articles out—nothing like the theoretical explanation that Carolyn Miller came up with. I had the data, and the glimmers of rhetorical explanation, but Carolyn Miller's article, "Genre as Social Action," built off of work that others have done, especially—and she credits them of course—including Colin Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. [Miller] was drawing off other people too, but largely form the field of communication studies, and not in our new field of composition yet. Someone told me there was this article on genre in the quarterly *Journal of Speech* that I might want to take a look at. And I looked at it and went, "Oh, wow. Thank goodness. This is the explanation." She did such a nice, elaborated job and controlled the theory behind it so well, and she gave a great explanation and now everybody cites her article. It was really the article that got us to pay attention. There were others too—John Swales, in *English for Special Purposes*, from a linguistics, second language point of view.

➡️What are your favorite courses to teach?

I've taught seminars in genre theory several times. I always love that. That class differs greatly depending on what students are in the class, because, of course, you can explore any genre. I've taught a seminar in standardizing written English. One course that I've been teaching was a topics course that I called "The Rhetoric of Correctness." It was a course where we look at the history of standardization of written English and the social origins, and explore what it's like today and the notion that we have to speak and write correctly to achieve social status. Where did that come from historically, and what's at stake today? The students would do studies of different features. Say "hopefully," we can have a nice interview and go study what prescriptions have been put forward about "hopefully" and understand it. One student sat in the faculty lounge inconspicuously reading and counted all the professors during the day who used "hopefully" as a sentence modifier so she could say, "See. There's a difference between what we say and what we actually use." I enjoy the projects that students do in rhetoric and standardization. Of course I teach a composition studies survey, but a three-hour introduction to the field for first-year

teachers—it used to be practicum, but now it's theory. The course for new teachers is great fun. We have a week bootcamp before classes start, but during the course of their first semester they take this course along with it, so we asses their work, as well as the literature of composition studies together. It sort of takes me back to my roots of wanting to get into composition because I wanted to teach better, and what could the field tell us about how to teach. Reading the theories and understanding what we're doing, of course, but also literature on how to design assignments and literature on how to help students have agency for their writing, and things like that. I love teaching first-year composition. I make sure I teach composition fairly regularly. It's hard, hard, hard.

The graduate level survey is called "Composition Studies," but it might as well be called "Composition Theory," because so many of our students take this practicum I was describing where most of what we read in "Composition Studies" is directly related to teaching. So the survey in "Composition Studies" is for people who want to follow up with more than that in the field of Composition Studies and the discipline of Rhetoric. What does it include?

➡What's the relationship between rhetorical theory and genre theory?

Problems of definition are really problems. That's the problem with our field. Is it Writing Studies, Composition Studies, Rhetoric and Composition, Composition and Rhetoric, Literacy Studies? All of those names have been offered, and all those names used. So I tend to think of the field as Composition and Rhetoric, myself. I was trained and came through a program that defined itself as composition, and not rhetoric. So my work comes out of Composition and English Language Studies. I think genre theory is a portion of rhetorical theory. I don't see how it cannot be.

Genre is symbolic action; using symbolic action to create meaning. The current notion of genre defines it as social action. It defines how we do things with language, which is rhetorical. I think genre theory is part of rhetorical theory. How do we do things with language? Genre is one of the important ways we do things with that. Genre is a "response" to recurring, repeated rhetorical situations. When we look at genres, I emphasize that it's a way of looking at the rhetoric of a situation. Let's look at the rhetoric of our situation now. What are our purposes? Who are the participants? What roles are we playing? What am I trying to persuade you of? What are you trying to persuade me of? Or we can say this is an interview. And already you know my role as an interviewee: I'm supposed to know things that are worth other people hearing. Your role as the interviewer: you ask your questions in a kindly way. We know the kinds of roles we're going to play. We know the interaction we're going to have because we know it's an interview. Knowing the genre means we know the rhetoric of this situation. So I like genre as an approach to rhetoric. Instead of teaching students who are looking at writing to understand it by saying, "Let's look at the purpose, the audience, the setting," I say, "What's the genre?" Several things fall

into place. I would maintain that's how we use genres in our use language; it's already there. It's a way of encapsulating the rhetorical situation for them and making it more tangible, more identifiable. It narrows the variables. If you're doing an interview and you want to not be a expert interviewee, for example, you think, "Well, we've got this genre of interview where you've put me in the position of trying to be the expert." You ask me questions, and then I pronounce for awhile. If I am not comfortable in that role, what can I do individually in the genre of the interview to undercut that or to head a different direction?

Some people in more linguistic approaches to genre and speech act theory draw on script theory as one of the ways of thinking about it. Script Theory was much more determined than genre. Scripts are more linear and prescriptive than genres are. Genre gives you a way to compare one individual act or utterance versus another. Genre provides for the differences. Genre is the typification of an experience. Each experience is unique. Genre is not stable—it's shaky. Genres aren't stable at any point. They are "fluxy." Each situation is unique, so even though we say this is the genre of the interview still means it's a unique rhetorical experience. That's where I think writing and language use gets interesting. One of the things that I think is misunderstood about genre is that it's inhibiting. But it's what enables us to see what has been switched. You know that because you know the genre.

➡Do you think it's more important for analyzing rhetoric or imparting to students?

I personally think that we teach students by helping them analyze it. I would argue for teaching genre awareness. How they encapsulate the rhetorical situation. Genres do not make us do things. The expectations for the genre and for the ideology behind it encourage us to do things. Teaching genre makes students aware of influences on their discourse. Genre awareness makes them more aware of what language does. I think the way to get to genre awareness is through analysis. You could start teaching genre awareness in elementary school by using the language of genre. Does anyone know a joke? What are jokes like? Have them become sensitive to the pattern. I have yet to encounter a simple genre. I am definitely not in favor of teaching a genre by analyzing that specific genre. That's not going to teach students how to tell a joke. I'm not in favor of having students analyze a literary analysis paper in order to write a literary analysis paper. That causes restrained and limited interpretations. Here is a genre with certain interpretations, if you want to teach the literary analysis paper to teach how genre works. Explicit teaching of genre: no. But, explicit teaching of genre awareness: yes.

Genres are ideological and the existing ideologies reinforce the ideologies of a group. Genre awareness is understanding that it represents ideologies.

I think perhaps critical pedagogy, the very name of it and the sources of it give it a particular slant and a particular agenda. Rhetorical pedagogy I think is probably

pedagogy based on trying to understand the rhetoric of symbolic action. I would agree that that is everything. It teaches things like audience, and purpose, and that these are defining qualities of our use of language. Rhetorical pedagogy, well critical pedagogy. In genre theory there was a moment with critical studies, about ten years, ago. There was a critical turn towards genre theory. We began to notice more explicitly the ideologies genres bring with them. I think it reflects that ideological shift. These days you can't do rhetoric without studying ideology. In theory, once you recognize ideology as a part of things, you can't not recognize it anymore. If you deal with theory and ignore ideology you're missing a part. Which things do you want to pull out when you teach? Writing and reading are too huge to teach. What do you choose to teach? Whether you teach it or not is what is controversial.

➡What is most important for rhet/comp students to consider or think about?

The field has gotten so large with so many different parts to it, so the big question varies on what you're interested in. Yet, I will generalize. The effect of new technologies on language use is one of the things that is changing including visual rhetoric and multimedia writing. I think I have a little bit of that where we insist on academic papers and academic writing and I wonder if the functions of academic writing reach outside of the university. We teach them to interact with ideas and make meaning out of sources. I wonder if our attempt to make good citizens and good writers is past. When we think about the writing that our students will do outside the university is changing.

The research project our students do in the second semester expands to the genres we have them write. We have podcasts, and video essays, and web pages we have to expand our ideas. I have to get into multimedia. How do we incorporate that into our writing classes?

We can analyze the multimodal discourse quite a bit, but if we don't have them actually create text, then we're only teaching them how to analyze and not giving them the opportunities to generate except in the traditional linear academic way. That's a challenge and a struggle. It's one of the most important things to look at in the field today.

IS it more helpful to analyze genres and multimodal discourse or to create text in a discipline. If we only have them analyze the text where not teaching them all of the genre.

➡What's the most important thing to know about genre?

They don't deserve the bad rap they have. They are flexible, as well as stable. Probably the most important thing is that genres are operating on people all the time and to be aware of the genres you are using and their effects on people and language

including interviews, and academics talks and conference presentations. The things we write too, all these have ideologies with force behind them and we are capable of acting within them and making changes.