

**Spring 2018 Interview—Dr. Susan MILLER-COCHRAN**  
**Interview Team—BH Brendan Hawkins, JE Julianna Edmonds, JT Jessi Thomsen**

**JT:** The first question is pretty broad and sort of background material. How did you get into rhetoric and composition studies?

**MILLER-COCHRAN:** Everybody has a story about this. I remember when I was in grad school and I helped my advisor Duane Roen who was working on this edited collection that I think you can still find some place called *Living Rhetoric and Composition*. But, it was basically a collection of stories from different people and how they got into the field. Really fascinating! I highly recommend it. And I remember kind of early in grad school thinking about these really varied stories from people like Sharon Crowley, Frank D'Angelo, Wendy Bishop, a lot of different people and how they got into the field. So, one of the things that was very clear to me is that people come to Rhetoric and Composition from a range of different disciplines, a range of different experiences. So, I am no different. I started out in graduate school working on a master's in Applied Linguistics. I just wanted to get my masters. I wanted to teach ESL. As an undergrad I had done a summer teaching experience teaching English in China, and so I was really interested in teaching and traveling, and teaching and knowing how to teach English. I had done that experience as an undergrad without having any kind of preparation. That was back when you could easily get a job teaching in ESL just because you were a “native” English speaker, but I didn't really know how to explain anything. So, I went to do my masters at Arizona State University, and like so many people, I was assigned, as a graduate student, to teach the first year writing sequence. So, I taught the first two semesters. The second year I taught that ESL track that we have there. So, they were the same courses but specifically for international students. I really started to fall in love with teaching writing specifically, and I was seeing a lot of similarities with what I was learning about second language acquisition, how people learn a new language, and then what I was seeing in one class with how students were learning to write in academic English, and I really didn't have the language to talk about it then. Of course a lot of scholars have written about this, becoming familiar with new discourse communities, but the parallels that I was seeing and the way that the theories I was learning about in second language acquisition applied to the writing classroom were really fascinating me. So, after I finished my masters I decided to stay and do a doctorate and that's the point where I kind of moved over more towards Rhetoric and Composition. Although, at that time, the graduate program was a joint program between Rhet/Comp and linguistics, so technically I could still do both. And in grad school I studied second language writing and instructional technology. Those are kind of the areas I was most interested in. That was kind of how I got into the field. The director of the writing program at ASU when I started was Duane Roen. He ended up chairing my dissertation. He kind of convinced me. He converted me if you would like to use a religious metaphor [laughter]. He really understood those connections and was interested in working with second language writers too, so that provided a really nice space for me to explore that.

**JT:** This is sort of a follow up to that one, but what experiences or ideas prompted you to focus on your areas of interest? We know you are talking about assessment and community building today but also administrative work so what made you focus there?

**MILLER-COCHRAN:** Well I mentioned the second language writing part already. What started to interest me, and I mentioned distance learning. What first, I think, interested me in

some of these areas was my first job out of grad school. It was at a community college, so, I had a full-time faculty position. It was a tenure-line position although we didn't call it tenure, but it's the same thing. And I was there for six years, and I think that completely opened my eyes to a different area of academia, a different student population, a different teaching population, different working conditions, and writing courses. That really raised my awareness about the importance of thinking beyond the research-focused universities. So, that experience even though it's now been, I left the community college in 2006, so it's been 12 years, but I think that still is foundational to how I see everything both as an administrator and as a teacher. When I moved from the community college I took a job at NC State to direct the writing program, and that was the point at which I really kind of made the switch to formally focus on administration. A lot of the kinds of things that I research and focus on as an administrator included the work I'm doing now with assessment and communities building. I was doing this at the community college; I just didn't have a title. There was no WPA at the community college. And Jeff Klausman and Jeff Andelora and a lot of people within the community college have written about that. but I had kind of a service-based position. I was the chair of the composition committee, but in that role I worked with two of my colleagues at the community college; Shelley Rodrigo and Craig Jacobsen. Shelley is now with me at U of A, and Craig is the department chair at the college where we worked. But the three of us worked together with a lot of faculty to really transform the curriculum in the community college district as a whole, and I think that experience of having to work with, I think there were maybe a hundred and fifty faculty district-wide, that we had to kind of get on board to thinking about moving beyond the current traditional model, a mode based model, and to think about other ways of teaching writing. That experience really interested me into continuing to do administrative work and thinking about the implications for assessment, for placement, for transfer, for working conditions, for student learning conditions, and all kinds of things. It's kind of a domino effect. When you move one little piece of it, it starts to affect everything else. I think also I just know that I am kind of a type A person and, I like dealing with logistics and there's something about administrative work that I find appealing. It's almost like a bridge between the humanities part of my brain that loves English studies and then the part of my brain that has always been the attracted to organizational kinds of topics and things like statistics, and so it builds a nice bridge between those things that I'm interested in.

**JE:** Thank you. So, we are also interested in which scholars have influenced your thinking the most.

**MILLER-COCHRAN:** Oh gosh! That's a tough question to answer because it's always evolving there are people who influenced my thinking a lot especially starting in grad school. I think the first book I can remember having just a completely transformative impact on how I thought about what I do was Brian Street's *Social Literacies*. He is a sociolinguist. That book really transformed the way I understood what literacy was and how it was defined and how it was constructed within communities. So his work certainly has stuck with me. A lot of the scholars who have influenced my thinking the most over the last 10 years have been people that I have worked with at various points. So at NC State I worked with Chris Anson, Michael Carter, Carolyn Miller—their work has really influenced the way I think about academic writing, about genres within academic writing, and about how students learn to engage with those communities and how we work with writing across the curriculum. Tony Silva's work has also influenced my thinking over my career and how I think about multilingualism especially the role of the WPA

and the responsibility and accountability that the WPA has to begin thinking about language diversity in the classroom. I would say also Jay Dolmage and Melanie Yergeau, Tracy Morris and a lot of disability scholars How to influence my thinking recently as well as also thinking about how we design curricula, how we design our classrooms, how we design our programs to accommodate and welcome of range of students but also the scholars who probably influence my thinking the absolute most are the grad students that I work with. So I've done a lot of collaborative work with my graduate students Dana Gierdowski at NC State really influenced how I think about classroom design. Most recently I worked with Maria Conti and Rachel LeMance at U of A on a lot of the work I'm going to talk about today with assessment and community building. That has come out of the work that I did with them, and then my frequent scholarly partner is Shelley Rodrigo. We end up doing a lot of work together specifically thinking about instructional technology. So, I definitely need to mention her. She's kind of my go-to person, thinking through both administrative issues and also scholarly issues and how we talk about those. I could name a lot of other people, but that's a good start. [laughter]

**BH:** What about your life experiences. How have they shaped your thinking?

**MILLER-COCHRAN:** I want to focus on two, but there are a lot that we could all talk about right? This feels very funny talking about myself, but I want to focus on two. First, I want to talk about being a parent. I have two children. They are 6 and 11 and my oldest, my son, has autism. And so when he was born, and especially around the time that he was diagnosed, he was two, I had been teaching writing for a long time and there are a lot of things that we teach in the writing classroom and we train grad students to think about that are based on our own assumptions about frankly how the brain works and what kinds of things help students adapt to new discourse communities. I really started to understand that some of the assumptions that I was making about how my students think were not fair. They were based on the way that I perceive the world and the way I process the world and that some of the assignments that I would use as entry level assignments with my students thinking that they would be easy entry points for somebody who thinks more like my son would actually be the very hardest thing for him to do. For example, an assignment where I'm asking a student to think about how they might shift a scholarship application letter they're writing to this group or to that group, or like how you cast something for different audiences. A lot of students find that really interesting, but that kind of discourse is really hard for my son because what's most difficult for him is seeing something from another person's perspective, kind of imagining how they perceive the world. So that has shifted my thinking in terms of classroom design and pedagogy and curriculum to really think about the implications of Universal Design. Universal Design is start of a fraught term too. But thinking about designing for, as Jennifer Bowie has talked about with universal users. So thinking about the diversity of users and of students who enter our classrooms and how we design. So that has really influenced my thinking.

The other is the partner that I have, my husband, who is a lecturer in our writing program at U of A. So he has always taught off of the tenure track, and his experience of being a faculty member and his experience of working in academia has really transformed how I think about working conditions and writing programs too. It helps me to see things in the way that I think that a lot of teachers in my program might be a little more nervous to share. So he'll sometimes tell me things that other people wouldn't say. Although we also have to kind of walk that line carefully in how we talk about things. His perspective and the honesty with which he talks about his experience

has been really transformative I think for me. I like to imagine or hope that regardless I would have been concerned about or seen these things, but I think it's inevitable that the experiences we have in life lead us in certain directions. So, I have a lot of gratitude both to Sam and to my husband and I see how they've helped me see things in different ways.

**JE:** So, now we are going to shift to your teaching. These are my favorite questions. Which classes do you teach? Which are your favorite and why?

**MILLER-COCHRAN:** That's a funny question: I just revealed to my department head yesterday that I've never taught an upper division undergraduate class which just seems ridiculous. I did as a grad student. I taught a socio-linguistics class, but other than that, as a faculty member I've never gotten to. At the community college we just taught 100 and 200 level classes and then since I've been a WPA my teaching load is always reduced and so usually I'm teaching a graduate course. And both at NC State and U of A I've only been teaching one class a year, so it's usually a graduate course and I have to fight to sometimes get to teach 100 level courses. I always make the argument that you have no street cred if you never teach the classes in the program that you're directing. You need to teach them sometimes. So, with that disclaimer made, I think I would love to teach upper-division undergrad courses, but I've never done it. [laughter] With that said, in some ways it's kind of a toss-up for me between kind of the 100 entry level classes we have in writing...I love teaching those classes. I do especially like teaching in the track for international students which is what I usually do. We also have a class at U of A, and I haven't gotten to teach, but I substitute for it sometimes. It's for basic writers, but we have a studio writing class that has a one credit hour studio linked on to our 101 and I love teaching that Studio section too. It's a wonderful class. So teaching those classes is really interesting. In terms of graduate seminars, I love teaching Writing Program Administration too. I've taught it several times now and I feel like I always have to find the balance between... it's the classroom where you see how the sausage is made which is not always a pleasant experience [laughter]. So I feel like it's always a balance between being really honest, being transparent about some of the tension that we live in as WPAs. I'm making it sound like a really awful job. The very first time I ever taught that graduate class I'll never forget I co-taught it with Chris Anson and on the student evaluations at the end of the semester one of the students wrote "it's a wonderful class but at the end of the semester I really don't know why anyone would do this job". So I thought maybe I need to pick more uplifting research. But there are a lot of challenges that are inherent in that job too, but I learned a lot from teaching the WPA Grad Seminar, seeing and talking about decisions that I have to think about through the perspective of the grad students in that class is really helpful for me.

**JE:** Can you tell us a little bit about your approach to teaching FYC?

**MILLER-COCHRAN:** I tend to gravitate towards an approach to teaching First-Year Writing that incorporates writing in different academic disciplines. My thinking is shifting and we are always in a process of evolving. For a long time I've been working through approaches to teaching more of a writing in the disciplines or writing about the disciplines approach into First-Year Writing. In some ways it's sort of like Writing about Writing, but it's writing about writing in the disciplines. It's kind of like getting students to think about or explore writing in different disciplinary areas and understand how they analyze it to give them tools, so they can really do well in the classes that they take later.

**JE:** [laughter] My favorite question. What's on your nightstand?

**MILLER-COCHRAN:** That's a great question. I love that one. So, I have a Himalayan sea salt lamp on my nightstand to decrease my anxiety and stress. So let's see, the most recent book that I finished was *Big Little Lies* by Liane Moriarty.

**JE:** Have you watched the show?

**MILLER-COCHRAN:** I have not. I will have to watch the series, because Meryl Streep is coming in season two. This year, and this was kinds of a New Year's resolution for me, I'm trying to embrace reading things that are non-academic and doing more of that than I have done in the past. Since the beginning of the year, I have read *Big Little Lies*. I have read *The Perks of Being a Wall Flower* because I had never read that before. So, I have just been trying to read some other things. The next thing on my nightstand is the book *Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu*, and a Douglas Carlton Abrams book called *The Book of Joy*. Maybe this is my way of processing some of the angst and anxiety that comes from being a WPA. So, those are the things that are on my nightstand. There's not anything academic on my nightstand. I can't read academic stuff at night to fall asleep.

**BH:** What are you reading at the moment for scholarly purposes. We kind of talked about non-scholarly, but what are you complementing that with?

**MILLER-COCHRAN:** So, let's see. Right now I have a stack of books on my desk about labor and working conditions, because it is an area I have a lot of interest in, and I have mentioned it several times now. But I haven't really engaged as much with the scholarship, so work by people like Toby Scott. I try to read a range of perspectives, so most recently I went back and re-read Donna Strickland's *The Managerial Unconscious* which is a challenging book for me. I think because I recognize so much of my own experience in it and it's kind of uncomfortable, but trying to figure out how to push against some of those trains of view. So, those are some of the books that I'm looking at most right now. I've also been, and I was talking with some of the grad students this morning about this, I have been working on rethinking how we do our GTA training and dealing with that tension, which I imagine you probably deal with here. When you are training GTA's in an English Department, and there's always a tension about how much in the field do people need to read in order to be really good teachers of writing. This was a tension I felt at the community college too, because everyone in the department taught writing but very few people had training in teaching writing. So, we would talk a lot about which kinds of things were important to be familiar with. We have moved towards starting to use *Naming What We Know* and thinking about threshold concepts of writing sort of as an entry point. Almost likes its a middle ground between having students read theory to explain why we do what we do or just giving them a syllabus template and saying "Okay, do this," because we know this is what you should do. There's something about the way *Naming What We Know* is written. I think it gives clear, accessible explanations for what our principles are. What we know about teaching writing and here's why we do what we do without necessary having to read all of the theory that lead to those threshold concepts of writing, if that makes sense. So, I have been revisiting that text and

actually thinking about how to incorporate that in different ways into our GTA training. That is a project I am working on with my colleague Aimee Mapes who does our GTA training.

**JE:** What do you think is the most important questions students in rhetoric and composition should be considering today?

**MILLER-COCHRAN:** Oh, I should have thought about this question before I came. It is a really difficult one. I don't know if I am going to phrase this as a question but I will at least think of it in terms of an issue. No, I will try to actually answer it. I will do my best. I think one of the most important questions that students in Rhet/Comp need to consider is how to transform our writing programs, [and] the spaces, both physical spaces and curricular spaces, that we occupy to make them more welcoming, more inclusive, more equitable for teachers and students. That's a big question and it encompasses a lot of different areas of research that we see in our field right now, but I think that is one of biggest challenges that we have. One of the things that makes it such a challenge is the requirement of first-year writing itself. [It] creates two very different expectations and conditions that are hard to push against, [so] rethinking that and figuring out new ways forward I think that's one of the most important questions, and honestly I think people who are new in the field are going to lead the way on that, because a lot of us are sort of entrenched in our thinking about what first-year writing looks like, and we need new ideas, new ways of thinking about what writing instruction looks like. That is kind of answering your next question too. [laughter]

**BH:** So [I will] just go ahead and ask the next question. So, where do you see that going?

**MILLER-COCHRAN:** I don't know if I have a really good answer to that. I have always suffered from not having a very good imagination of the possibilities of what things could be. I would like to be more open in my thinking about this. Where do I see it going? Well, one area that I think is certainly going to change and that we need to grow into is rethinking how it is we define what writing is, what the work is that our students are doing, and what we are teaching. And I think one of the challenges is that in academic institutions we work with a very "siloed" mentality. I don't know if you have the same tensions at FSU, but at my institution courses about digital media or about new media are kind of owned by a particular school or department and it's not English. So, if I want to rethink what writing instruction looks like, I have to be careful about what I call it, because there is all of this territorialism around different disciplinary areas, and I think it ultimately disadvantages the student and prevents us from really transforming what the curriculum looks like. So, one of the directions in which I see the field of Rhet/Comp going, and it has been going in this direction for a while, is rethinking how we define composing, what it is we are teaching, what it is we are studying, and not just in terms of digital but in non-alphabetic text and communication also in our historical work. I have been influenced a lot by the work of my colleague Damian Baca at U of A in that particular regard. So, that would be one direction. I will leave it there. There are a lot of things that I guess I could say about where I see the field going. I will stop there.

**JT:** So, is there anything else that you would like to add that we haven't really talked about?

**MILLER-COCHRAN:** I can't think of any anything right now, but is there any question that you all want to ask me that I have not addressed? [laughter]

**JT:** I feel like I had a start to a question with where you sort of left off with your last answer. And so I guess I wanted to know a little bit more about when you had talked about the tension between what you're trying to do in your own classes and what to call them because of something that is "owned" by other departments and other disciplines. So I guess I was curious, specifically to [University of] Arizona, what kind of steps are you able to take right now or are you looking at in the near future?

**MILLER-COCHRAN:** Well we do a lot of things within the curriculum itself without changing the name of the course. [laughter] There are a lot of teachers who do a range of different kinds of multimodal work with their students in their classes, whether it's having them remix something or kind of do a remediation sort of project. I am working on a new curriculum for a second semester L2 writing course that I will pilot this summer with one of our grad students that's looking at how to really incorporate multimodal composing throughout the curriculum in that course to really think about what that might look like and kind of what shape that might take. Those are more subversive answers. It's kind of small scale not really transforming a curriculum. We are having conversations at U of A about things to do on in interdisciplinary basis to so like how do we work across different departments some of this is constrained by the way budgets are set up how resources are allocated and that's where the territorialism comes from often not always but often so thinking about how the work between an English Department and at U of A it's called the department of or School of Information and that's where there are a lot of the digital media courses. We have a separate Department that does journalism that also does a lot of really interesting stuff with media and writing but just thinking about how to work across those boundaries and thinking of more of an interdisciplinary multidisciplinary or even transdisciplinary way about the work that we might do.

**JT:** So, as administrators, is that something that you all have a lot of influence in when doing that, or is it something that is delegated to some others in the department?

**MILLER-COCHRAN:** That's a great question. So, this is a question that is a really good question about where do you try to start change so do you start at the 100 level buy kind of transforming what these entry level requirements horses look like do you start at the grad level or kind of the other end of the spectrum by rethinking or creating an interdisciplinary graduate program or designing new courses that... I mean so these are two different opposite ends of the spectrum when thinking about the same issue and I don't really know what the answer is to that I think there are also ways to think about creating interdisciplinary majors at the undergraduate level or thinking about ways to cross list courses or co-teach courses at the undergraduate level. I think my role in those conversations, though I participate in them in different ways partly as a WPA but partly just as a faculty member of Rhet/Comp whose background is also in working with digital media, and I am interested in those kinds of conversations so that sometimes it is difficult for me to figure out which hat I am wearing in which conversation. I am also a co-director of our grad program right now so then it's like "Who am I?" in this conversation—figuring out what direction you want to take and that transformation is challenging, and I also want to be careful because I am still relatively new there. This is my third year at U of A, so I'm

still kind of getting to know the culture and kind of understanding the histories that have led to why things are the way they are. And it's very easy to come in and think that it should look this way because that's how it looked at my last institution, and it worked really well without understanding the context. I mean if there's anything we learn as rhetoricians it should be that we understand the context in which we were working, but at NC State we had a wonderful interdisciplinary graduate program in communication rhetoric and digital media and it was owned by multiple programs at multiple departments but that works in a certain way at that Institution for very specific reasons including who the faculty were who designed it, the college those departments lived in, what kind of support was given to the program, how it was set up...so thinking about how to then make something either like that or different that's more appropriate for the institution I am at now. Working at it as an interesting challenge I haven't quite figured that out yet. I think we will get there but it's a process that's evolving.

**JT:** Thank you.

**JE:** I am interested in your explanation of moving from the Community College context to the other institutional types. I was wondering about specifically the struggles that you faced in the shifts.

**MILLER-COCHRAN:** I end up talking to a lot of people especially faculty who are at community colleges who are maybe interested in moving, or grad students who are trying to decide should I even consider positions at these other kinds of institutions or do I need to just think about research-based institutions. There were some struggles. What I will say is when I made the move from Mesa, I had been there 6 years at Mesa Community College, so I earned the equivalent of what was considered tenure, although it didn't have anything to do with research. It was completely based on teaching, so I had a tenured position there. When I moved to NC State, they hired me in as an associate professor. They did not hire me in with tenure though, so I was an associate professor, but I had to wait a year and go up for tenure. What was explained to me was that they did that frequently with people that they hired in as associate [professor]. They have to go through the tenure process. That made me very nervous, but I was reassured many times by the faculty that they would not have brought me in if they didn't think my research already met the requirements of being an associate professor. But I think changing my thinking about what I focus my time on was a challenge, but then I realized I didn't really have to change it as much as I thought. So at the community college where I was, at that particular school, there were a lot of opportunities to engage in research within the kind of scholarship of teaching and learning, so as long as your research was focused on teaching, focused on pedagogy involving students and student learning, that was highly valued at the community college. At some research universities that is not as valued. At NC State it was. No, I shouldn't say by everybody. I am sure there were some doubters in my department, but a lot of the kinds of things that I had been investing my time in as a scholar, like when I was at the community college, we're also valued by that department and I don't think I would have made the move had I been concerned about that. I had gone on the job market before and had turned down places that I felt like the transition would not... I would be asked to change who I was as a scholar. I dealt with criticism going up for both tenure and/or full professor that my scholarship is too pedagogy focused, too practical, or too applied [laughter]. Frankly I don't care. I mean that's what I do. that's what I'm interested in and were I in the College of Ed. nobody would say that, but that's the field we are in. I think

sometimes that kind of research is valued, sometimes not. When you're in an English Department, which I've always been, there are always folks who don't understand that kind of work. It's not highly theoretical. That's not really the scholarship that I do, so I think that has sometimes been a challenge. Maybe it's been more of a challenge for me personally, feeling like I...I had mentioned to you yesterday, Brendan, that...imposter syndrome. And I think sometimes I struggle with that thinking, "Well, I'm not a real scholar though." I don't do that theory-based stuff. That's not really what I do. I do these kind of practical studies and I think that's something that I still struggle with. I can't necessarily attribute that to starting at a community college. I think that's more me, but part of the challenge is dealing with that shift that sometimes teaching focused research was not as privileged at a university as I was used to, but also understanding that you know what this is who I am and if you didn't like, you wouldn't have hired me in the first place. And I don't have to change who I am and I'm not going to. So, and networking and finding the people in the field that can kind of help support that work has been really important too. So, I found mentors outside of my institution who have been really beneficial. Some of them are in your program here. You guys have some great faculty.

**JE:** This concludes the interview. [laughter]