Fall 2016 Interview—Dr. Ellen CUSHMAN
Interview Team—JN Jeff Naftzinger, JE Julianna Edmonds, NL Netty Lehn, AB Amanda Brooks

AB: Okay, I think we're good.
JN: Cool. So, first question: How did you get into literacy studies?
CUSHMAN: I got into literacy studies when I started tutoring, uh, in the writing center, actually, at Cal-State University in San Bernardino. And this was in 1989. At the time, it was an open university so everybody who applied was accepted. And San Bernardino was a hub for immigration in southern California at the time and it was wonderful, it was like teaching the United Nations. And every student had the most…everybody that I worked with and most of them were older than I was…and some of them had just come from their country and maybe they didn't have any formal schooling at all--formal education whatsoever. And they were just learning writing systems to begin with and just practicing with that. And some of them were more advanced in different disciplines, and some of them were… it was just a wonderful experience in terms of learning where people were coming from and how important reading and writing were in their lives. From there I was hooked! And I wanted to learn more about all the ways in which reading and writing help us understand learning and getting ahead and struggling for survival and making ends meet…that really spoke to me.
JN: If I can ask a related question, how did you get involved with the writing center?
CUSHMAN: Oh, Carol Havelin, God bless her. Do you all know her? She does writing center research…she's great. She hired me, actually, by way of what I have now come to understand…Robert Lee, who was an American literature professor. He was my literacy sponsor at Cal-State. He recognized me, and he taught these huge lecture classes--150 people--where undergrads had to take Introduction to America Literature. And, he had the best kinds of class notes, and lectures, and slides already laid out…just wonderful…and my hand would ache at the end of class I would write so furiously, and I was doing really well on the quizzes and one day he just stopped and out of all these students he looked at me as people were gathering their quizzes off the table, and he said, "Stop." And he pointed at me, "Stop," and I had my quiz in my hand and I was like a deer in headlights and he quick grabbed it out of my hand, flipped it over and looked at my name. "Cushman," he says, "meet me at my office hours this week," and hands me the quiz back. He was very gruff and he had a very firm personality like that. So, I went to meet him at office hours, and he asked me to TA for him…uh…the next semester, which was fantastic… I was really thrilled about it actually. So I TAed for him for about a semester or so, mostly just graded papers and the like, and he gave me a reference. And that's how I got into the writing center. Carol hired me at his recommendation, and she said, "You know, that's a hard won recommendation from Bob Lee," and I said, "Yeah, he's kind of a tough cookie." [Laughs]. But, I ended up taking a few more classes with him, and gosh, he's such a great guy.
AB: Well, this is kind of a related question, then. So, what scholars in the field have most influenced your thinking?
CUSHMAN: Oh, my thinking…oh, well gosh. There've been so many. I guess I would wonder which part of my thinking we're talking about. So, my thinking on diversity and inclusion, um, Victor Villanueva, certainly, uh, there's just so many, Harriet Malinowitz, and Jackie Royster of course, and Shirley Logan. And, you know, for literacy studies Deb Brandt, I just can't go far from Deb's work. Beverly Moss, Lon Guerra, definitely Peter Smaggerinski for research methods for, um, writing very complex research articles and research design, teacher education,

literacy learning, and most recently for ability studies…alternative ability studies. He's done some wonderful work on Autism Spectrum Disorder. Let's see, in…uh, those might be some of the names I might use. I feel badly. I don't want that ever to go anywhere because I know there are so many people that I've missed. Research methods—Cheryl Geissler, definitely Cheryl Geissler. My dissertation director [unclear] Gordon who is an anthropologist and socio-linguist, but not a comp rhet scholar, uh let's see. Uh there's too many to list. And, I'm sorry, they gave me no time to prep, so if I've forgotten you, please know that I didn't mean to forget you and you are near and dear to my heart. Presuming of course that you are listening to this whoever you are that I've missed in my list.
All: [Laughs]
NL: How about life experiences? How have they shaped your thinking?
CUSHMAN: My life experiences? Oh, that would be easy. So, I'll speak to poverty most immediately, because that would certainly shape my thinking, my thinking about the struggle and the tools or going without or being evicted or having to use everyday literacies to get through the most complicated aspects of life, and how complicated those everyday literacies are, and the ways in which those don't necessarily get studied or understood in the context of their use. And, we often don't give people credit for what they know, so those life experiences have certainly shaped my inquiry, but it also has to do with understanding how various tools we use write us as we write them and write with them. And those tools can be grammars, they can be pens, pencils, digital tools, they could be different media, they could be genres, of course, or intellectual category systems, epistemes, epistemological structures. There are so many tools that we use to construct understanding, and my life experiences have taught me that command of more tools and more contexts allows you to have different kinds of agency. Does that answer your question?
NL: I think so
CUSHMAN: What life experiences? Or do you mean students' life experiences? Or my life experiences?
JN: Your life experiences.
CUSHMAN: Okay. So. Then I was close.
JN: That was a good answer.
JE: Next question. Which classes do you teach? Which are your favorite, and why?
CUSHMAN: Oh, boy, I love to teach outreach and engagement classes and anything that involves students being able to work with community members or our community partners. In part because students get to do all the work of creating projects that are immediately helpful for people and that are helping them exercise their agency as writers and thinkers and readers, and they learn right away how to build projects and do project management and how to work in teams and how to use complex digital video editing software, how to write for and with community members in a way that makes sense to those community members, and creating products ultimately that serve the goals, audiences, and purposes of community members. So those are my favorite, favorite, favorite classes, and my other favorite classes… I love teaching writing, and unfortunately I don't get to do that as much as I would like, aside from that project-based class, which involves quite a bit of writing. I don't get into the first-year classroom as much as I would like and I actually miss it quite a bit, but it's really difficult to structure my teaching to be able to teach first-year writing, so that's how that goes.
JE: When you were teaching first-year writing, did you bring your community activism lens?

CUSHMAN: No, actually, and I talk about this in a piece that was in Sue Hum's edited collection about positions and pedagogies…pedagogies and positions. Sorry, the title of the collection just left my mind. I can picture the cover of the book, though. So in that piece, I talk a little bit about why it is that when freshmen come into a university, oftentimes what they need is to deeply immerge in this very foreign place. And so I kind of understand that foreign-ness. Nobody's born and raised into first-year writing, and it's a breed of cat unto itself. And it does some very important work for students that I try to honor and respect, and help students understand the way that this institution works. So when I teach first-year writing, it's really building on students' cultural and linguistic assets as we think about ways we can learn from each other in a culturally reciprocal way, and that term is from… [name]…Cultural reciprocity….Learning from students' linguistics and cultural assets. She's in education actually, a teacher educator and second-language researcher – a second language acquisition researcher and doing literacy studies in communities. Boy, she's brilliant. So that cultural reciprocity in the classroom is really crucial to how it is that students come to humanize the university by humanizing us. So when we share how it is that we learn or our own lived experiences and the ways in which this place feels foreign, because as graduate students, in the first year or third year or second year or fourth year or fifth year, you're learning a process of becoming a scholar that is completely foreign, right? Not many of us have that kind of in-depth training, so it is…And at the same time, you all know how to succeed at universities; otherwise you wouldn't be where you are. Right? So you can be in this interesting place where you're simultaneously having incredible amounts of cultural assets at your disposal and linguistic assets at your disposal when you enter that first-year classroom, but then you're walking and talking and doing the work of a graduate student, and sometimes the confidence is the thing that gets the hardest to sustain because it's a complex learning environment.
[Laughter]
CUSHMAN: Yeah.
MB: All of us are like "yes." [laughs]
JE: [laughs] Thank you for validating us in this moment.
CUSHMAN: I completely understand that.
NL: It's something different. I wouldn't call it imposter syndrome. It's something else.
CUSHMAN: Yes. Can you name it?
NL: No [laughter]
CUSHMAN: But it would be interesting to think about what it is.
NL: I think it's definitely a certain type of ambiguity and uncertainty. But I think imposter syndrome doesn't entirely do it justice.
CUSHMAN: No it doesn't do it justice, because you're not an imposter, right? I mean, you've all experienced success, and it's important to remember the success that you've experienced. So as you're speaking to yourself and bolstering your own confidence, even when the challenges feel well beyond your skill set, and that's what Mihály Csíkszentmihályi would call an interruption of flow. Right? Do you know what I mean by that? It's a learning theory? Flow?
NL: Yes.
JE: For me, it's that liminal space – that "between" of being a student and being a teacher simultaneously. All the roles…
CUSHMAN: Right. Yes. Can I tell you something that I think might help?
JE: Please. [laughs]

CUSHMAN: The institution sets us up this way where we have to walk into the classroom and have a particular presence or sense of authority, and I appreciate that. That authority, it is an investment that you have, and you should wear it as you can, proudly and with the great amount of professional care that I know you all exercise routinely. But, that space of having that authority and being a student yourself is also part of this structure that you're within, and so…In Cherokee, the word for teaching and learning is very close to each other. There's only one sound that separates the two, and the two activities are seen very closely together all the time. It's difficult to dis-aggregate those, and so Cherokees are really forgiving of learning, because they understand that you're always teaching and learning at the same time, and believe me. I know this from personal experience. You can make many, many mistakes – in your pronunciation, in your sentence formation, in whatever it is, and everyone will nod and say "good effort! You're learning and learning well." [laughs] And then when you teach somebody else what you've learned, they nod and say "Good Effort! You're learning and teaching well." And so the two become fused and they build your confidence as both a teacher and learner at the same time because... you know there's... so, so I want you to know that [vacillation?] between goddess and pollywog [laughs] is actually really something that I think is part and parcel of the construction of the position of GA as a second or third or fourth year PhD student. And it's artificial and that would end my other comment to that: That if you, if you cut yourself this slack and say "Ahhh, I'm gonna be very human, and I'm gonna humanize this place, and when somebody says something that indicates they don't know something better, I'm gonna give that person, um, encouraging words and help that person along, right? And not shame them and make them feel badly. And I too am not gonna compare myself to other people. I'm going to the very best that I can at all times, and not shame myself if I don't know something. OH wait... I haven't read... Mya Poe?" And, right, so and... I try to, you know, I'm gonna shame anybody for that: How do I read Mya Poe. You know? How do you even spell that [laughs], right? So... yeah... I think we need to humanize the institution is what I'm saying. And not be so hard on ourselves when we have to learn something. That was a very roundabout way to answer your question.
MB: No that was great.
JN: Um, so my favorite question: What's on your nightstand?
CUSHMAN: Oh yeah, that's a... that's a....
JN: So another way to humanize the profession...
CUSHMAN: Yeah... yeah... Well, I have a humidifier [laughs]... I have humidifier, I'll admit it: I have a humidifier. I have HUGE glass of water, or bottle of water, or something every night—I drink a ton of water... not as I'm sleeping but when I wake up [laughs] I'm dirnking water. Um, I have... a little desk lamp that's very nice [laughs]. I have my journal that's in the night stand. I have a pen of course. I also sometimes, and only rarely, take my cell phone into... or an alarm into, um, the uh room with me. I try to keep all the electronics out of that room. Except for the humidifier and a fan [laughs] which we really can't do without, so... But if we could, we would. If we could sleep with windows open, we would. Yeah...
JN: And so I'll ask another related question: Um, what are you reading at the moment—both for scholarly and non-scholarly purposes?
CUSHMAN: Hmm. That's such a great question, because... Well, RTE (Research in the Teaching of English) articles and submissions, first and foremost; every week: seven, eight, nine, ten articles of submissions; two, three, four revise and resubmits. And these are 40 page long articles... I mean they're nothing to sneeze at, so the lion's share of my reading time is dedicated to the maintenance of the journal, Research in the Teaching of English: The Flagship Journal of

the National Council of Teachers of English [laughs]... I'm thinking of whoever's out there going "RTE...?" Yes! Research in the Teaching of English. So it is, um, it was a journal started about 50 years ago—we just celebrated our 50th anniversary—and because it has such an interdisciplinary... uh, group of readers—3000 subscribers, a pretty high impact factor, higher than the CCCs [laughs] in terms of its impact factor, that's for you Jonathan [Alexander], I know you're listening! [laughs] So... uh, that's my, uh, that's my reading these days. Um... Spirit and Reason by Vine Deloria, just... Oh and Custer Died For Your Sins, those are just, like, go to readings that I kind of keep handy because, a) they make me laugh, because they're so ironic and brilliant, and, uh, I just kind of keep those around, um, Everyday Is A Good Day by Wilma Mankiller, um... it's an edited collection of, um, Native feminist women and that's aspirational reading. Um, so those are my kind of... you know every readings that just.... you know are affirming. And, um, and then my... the scholarly reading that I've been doing has been in decolonial translation, recently. Uh, and looking at decolonial theory, going back to Mignolo's work on translation, and then, um... doing this, you know, literature review of decolonial translation and translation studies, because there's a huge area of translation studies so I've been trying to learn a little bit more about how that unfolds and what the differences between decolonial translation and... other kinds of translation as a field are.... Different readings for different purposes.

MB: Yeah, that's a lot of reading!

CUSHMAN: Yeah! But if you ask me if I read, I say "No..." [laughs] "No, I never get..." Deb Brandt jokes about that, because I never get any... I don't have... If I could sit down and read a piece of fiction—you know, I would love to go to the Game of Thrones of readings and see how they compare to the television. Um... I don't if Downton Abbey was actually a book, but I would love to see that as a book, either that or I'll just pick up Jane Austen [laughs], which, you know, is pretty terrific. Um... Yeah, but I tend to read a lot of, um, current cultural theory: Cornell West, um, bell hooks, um, Linda Alcoff. You know, people who are doing that kind of critical cultural studies stuff. "Stuff"... listen to me. So if, if, if I'm needing the inspiration, um, and just the, um... when I'm doing the diversity and inclusion work and sometimes you just... it grates your soul and you think "Wow... am I the only person here?" and I can pick up somebody who can say "Yes! this our experience. This is the experience I've had." And so it's nice validation of the experience. Or, I pick up the phone and talk. Again: too much information [laughs].

JN: No, that was great.

MB: Yeah...

CUSHMAN: Next Question! [laughs] the interview...

NL: Number Six: What do you think is the most important question that students in Rhetoric and Composition should be considering today? It's a biggie...

CUSHMAN: That's a biggie. But it's so patently clear to me what that is and it's always been the question, "In whom's service do I do this work?", "Who is this work for?"… mm … and "Why am I doing this work?"…um… "What do I hope this work accomplishes?" and "for whom?"

JL: That's a great question. I've been working with my students, um, I teach uh, Writing Editing and Print Online, and uh … I've tried to reform the class around James Porter's theory of techne, one of the reasons I chose that particular theme was it talks about digital composing, but it does so in, um, from an ethical standpoint and in Porter's definition of techne, he has sort of a two part definition and one is thinking about the technical know-how aspects of what we do, but then the reason why I chose this theme is also for that same reason. I wanted to ask my students that

question, cause the second part of techne is who is this helping or hurting? Who is this empowering or disempowering? Um, so I really like to hear that that's a question that you think is important. Um, I'm trying to work with that with my students as well right now too, so yeah.
JE: That absolutely relates to our teaching. I want my students to think about that everytime they do a project you know. Maybe it's naïve to think that they care, but you know, it is important for them to see a reflection of themselves in the work that they're doing and in our classes.
CUSHMAN: It really is.
AB: It's a way of seeing outside their selves. I think a little bit too.
JE: Am I asking this one?
JL: Sure.
JE: Where do you see the field of literacy studies, rhetoric and composition going?
CUSHMAN: [pause]…Hmm. Honestly, it feels as though it's becoming as capacious as rhetoric once was, and I really appreciate that. I appreciate that it is getting to consider epistemologies that are um, uh, epistemologies and ways of being in the world that are different from, um, baselines of understanding that have been established in whatever tradition that you might want to say, um, Western tradition or other kinds of tradition like that. I see the field also more immediately doing work in larger scale kind of metadata analyses of writing and assessment…um, meta…certainly meta-theoretical studies have been around for some time, but I think people looking at corpus analysis or understanding how to do, tag particular understandings or sections of data in archives. There's this work that is of um the thinking-about-thinking—that's very exciting, and it's starting to take root in a number of different applications. It's in a number of different places. Um, I was listening to Jason Lewis recently, whose not in our field, but who's a really interesting native scholar out of Canada doing digital work and he was talking about "the stack" and how it is that the stack of any kind of technology, digital technology, is a colonized artifact through and through, top to bottom, in all of it, in every single place. He's a software engineer. He used to work for Apple, and, um, is now doing community-based work with youths and teens to try to teach them how to decolonize the stack. Do you know what I mean by "the stack?"
AB: I do not.
CUSHMAN: So, um, I wish I could give you the graphic of it but if you have an app for example and the software that's in the middle of the stack, but at the top of the stack are—it's the various levels of programming and the various levels of hardware and engineering that go into that app working. And all of the ways in which that app is created and that interface was created. Those are also levels of the stack. Um, another level of the stack would be a content that's created and imported for example, and so when he talks about the stack, it's the computational infrastructure that drills down for any particular artifact. It's a really brilliant concept, actually, it's not a concept, it's actually how computer engineers think about their work and the stack and how computational understandings come to be, um, lived—at least that's how I'm playing back to you what Jason described and I'm trying to describe a visual that he had of the stack where he disaggregates all the pieces of the stack, but I'm not doing it justice, so um, that's exciting to me. I wish I could bring his work to the attention of more scholars in our field, because thinking about the ways in which the work of empires is always in education and how empire is writ through everything we do—would be a really important place. And we're beginning to—we have a number of allies, you don't have to be an indigenous person to talk about empire because we're all—we're all impacted by modernity and modernity is rooted in empire, largely, so um,

we are part of, part of the system and the plication of empire all the time especially as English teachers which is really interesting.
JN: Great. Anything else you'd like to add on that we didn't address?
CUSHMAN: Umm, noo, no. I'd like to say that I really appreciate the work that Florida State is doing and um, how it's [noise] training(?) the next generation of comp/rhet scholars. They're gonna be outstanding and change makers, um, people who are doing good work, so yeah, go Florida State. And please, please, please do something about the Seminole Indian as your mascot! So very wrong on so many levels. Note to Florida State, please, *please*, address your mascot issues, and your diversity and inclusion issues. They're deep and wide. So—and if you need any help, please give me a call. Thank you for bringing me to campus. I appreciate that. And a big hearty nod to the Seminole people and the Seminole nation. Thank you.
JN: Thank you.