

## Transcript for Episode 17: Interview with Gesa Kirsch

*Run Time: 20:36*

AH: Allison Hitt (co-executive producer)  
KS: Karriann Soto (host, producer)  
GK: Gesa Kirsch (special guest)  
BK: Ben Kuebrich (co-executive producer)

*Cue music: “Namer” by High Places.*

AH: You’re listening to This Rhetorical Life, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

KS: In late October, we had a visit from Gesa Kirsch as part of the Rhetorical Listening & Composition Colloquium and Workshop Series. We were fortunate enough to have an opportunity to sit down and chat about her presentation titled “Mindfulness, Creativity, and Feminist Rhetorical Practices.” Our conversation revisited some of the points that she made in her talk but also delved into more pedagogical concerns, which still dealt with topics such as listening, mindfulness, and civic engagement.

*Cue music: “Note Drop” by Broke for Free.*

My first question was inspired by a pedagogical concern that I have been exploring recently. As I was thinking of a structured First-Year Composition pedagogy, where there is an emphasis on genre focused around an argumentative format, but also considering the exploratory writing, and mindful contemplation that Kirsch describes in her article “From Introspection to Action: Connecting Spirituality and Civic Engagement,” I asked what were some of her thoughts on how we could better bridge the two.

GK: Yeah, I would say, I do teach a Expository Writing course where I do quite a bit of exploratory writing, and I think even though ultimately we will write a research paper on a topic, I find that it’s a very good way to get people to discover topics that they care about. So, I would say that I still do a lot of exploratory writing and mindfulness writing in topics that, we—you know sometimes based on readings, sometimes based on their own experiences, sometimes based on what they major in, so I invite them to bring topics to class. And I do a lot of short writing, freewriting—sometimes in class, sometimes out of class—that are exploratory, that are not graded and sometimes not collected, but that enrich the conversation, that I can invite them to open the discussion, see what shows up there. And I find that sometimes even the first assignment, sort of an exploratory kind of writing—I teach one course where I focus on sense of place and really look at environmental or urban planning issues, eventually large problem spaces, as I would call them, but they often begin from a personal journey, you know, where the sidewalk ends in front of your house, when you’re forced to change modes of transportation. That tells you something about how we live and where we are or places they have come to know as children and love, and I think that’s always a good place to anchor somebody. Why do

they care about this park, and who takes care of it? What does that mean about other places like it or people who don't have access to beautiful spaces like that?

So the kind of discovery writing—I find that fun, and I send them on self-guided field trips, which is also fun to see where they go. And then they bring back what they discover or explore or see or learn about even, you know, often they're new to the Boston area so that's enriching that way, too. Sometimes it's the first time that they've ridden the subway, you know, if I make them go into the city, which is not that far. We're ten miles from Boston. So all of those are, I think, for me, my attempts at inviting them to explore and through exploration discover topics they care about, and I think once you've discovered what you care about or a piece that relates to your life or your major, then you can really dig your teeth into the research piece, and you have more passion for it and more commitment to it. Then I think in the end run that produces richer writing, I would hope.

KS: Based on her answer, I noticed that she doesn't necessarily collect or grade the students' exploratory writing, so I asked her about her approaches to assessment.

GK: Yeah, I mean I do different things, but I like portfolio grading. You know, only because it allows students some control of what they select to put in there. You know, I put some framework of two or three essays, or they have to write an introduction, and some pieces count for a little bit more. But [they have] some control because I tell them that's how real writers work. When you write for your dissertation, you don't through everything at your professor—blah, here's everything I produced. But you select, you craft, you focus on the things that you think are your best work. You might, for some writers, even showing me the different skills they have and the different genres that show different skill sets that you've learned, you know you frame that and you hand that in, and I think that's a richer way of grading than sort of the randomness of it...

KS: The assessment.

GK: Yeah, yeah.

KS: And so it would be like at the end of the semester?

GK: Yeah. I usually give them a midterm grade just so they have a sense of where they're at so they can sleep better at night, and I tell them that if they're really nervous they can come in after two weeks, bring me all their work, and I'll give them the grade that I would give them if the semester ended now. I don't want them or their parents to lose sleep over it, so I try to make myself accessible. I typically give them a midterm grade, and then the real grade is based on the portfolio. And they get lots of feedback. It's not that they don't get feedback. We workshop things, and people help them identify which writing strategies work and which don't, and so I spend a lot of time giving them feedback. But as soon as you put a grade on it, the discussion is, "Why is this a B+ and not a B?" or vice versa. And then you spend your energy focusing on that grade difference rather than what strategies *work*, what can you *learn*, what do you *see*

yourself. I think that learning to assess your writing is a very important skill, and I try to help them learn that, too, in the class because eventually you don't have a writing teacher, so you need to think about audience and context and genre and have some good questions to ask about length and style and tone and all of those things. So my goal for them is for them to become self-sufficient writers who can assess that and understand and have some terms when they're writing in different contexts.

KS: Great.

GK: That's what I hope for. [*laughter*] It doesn't always work out perfectly, but that's why we live and learn.

KS: And I'm thinking of Peter Elbow, which you quoted in ranking—

GK: Yes.

KS: —evaluating the midterm meeting and giving them the potential grade.

GK: Yes, right. Right.

KS: That's awesome. Thank you so much. That is helpful for me at least. [*laughter*]

GK: Yeah, I hope you get to explore that. I think it's a little tougher in your spot. You know, I probably have a little more autonomy as a professor, and I do disagree with some of my colleagues who see the academic essay as *the* valuable thing and nothing else counts, and I just don't see it that way. We agree to disagree, so I think you will have that authority, but I think it's good to explore that place. You know, I don't like to really give teaching advice. I think I talked about that in the graduate student meeting. I think it has to come from who you are, what resonates with you. So I think having faith in that—if you teach what is deep inside you, then you will reach people and you'll see it in their eyes. You know, so I think that the technique is not *it*, it is something that you value and you explain why you are valuing this.

KS: With heart, I think. I really appreciate that.

GK: Yeah.

KS: Considering the activity that Kirsch described in her talk, in which students go out to certain spaces to investigate their sense of place, our own Allison Hitt was motivated to ask about how we can better account for students' bodies, so I asked [about that] on her behalf.

GK: Yeah, I do a number of things. I do very short exercises sometimes with students in class, and I think you're absolutely right there—that the different abilities and needs and desires are complicated. I have to tell you: I'm not sure that I'm always totally mindful about that. I try to be, you know. I invite students to tell me. You know how Disability Services

is very clear about that. If students need accommodations, you know, we must meet them. I always offer that in the beginning. I'm not sure that students always feel comfortable coming to that, and I know that there's some nervousness. I do try to set up a class atmosphere where people are comfortable engaging, that is respectful, that people listen thoughtfully, that they're respectful. I always tell students that they have a—you know, if I go around in a circle sometimes for feedback—they can say that they're passing, that they don't want to speak right now. I like to respect people's—you know, who knows what's going on in their lives.

KS: Yeah.

GK: Parents are the worst thing, you know. They have, whatever, a tough time. So that's one way in which I try to be accommodating. Physical disabilities, what I learned from—Disability Services is very great at accommodating things. But yeah, I do think it's challenging. I know that people have different levels of comfort, degrees of introversion [and] extroversion. I try to create a space where people feel free to speak when they want to speak and what they want to share. Yeah, I'm not sure. That's an ongoing, I think, process that I need to think about as we do things.

We sometimes go outside for like a five-minute writing exercise. I want them to observe something very particular and then write about it, and then we come right back. So yeah, that requires physical mobility, requires a willingness to stand still for a few minutes and observe, requires ability not to look at your iPhone. That's probably maybe the biggest piece or challenge that people have. [laughter] So yeah, that's also I think ongoing things that I explore. Not sure that I have a strategy inviting students to feel comfortable talking to me outside of class, and working around that is what I try to do.

KS: Good.

GK: Tell me about yours or what you have learned or thought about.

KS: I mean I've been, this semester...I've always been careful about students *not* participating and then prompting them to participate when they don't want to—

GK: Mhmm.

KS: —and I've seen some students that demonstrate that they're not comfortable with my approach of like, name-calling sometimes.

GK: Mhmm, mhmm.

KS: And I'm becoming more aware of that as I keep teaching, and this semester I was going through some personal problems, as well. As a student, I was participating in a workshop. The workshop had us write. And then it was a prompt of like, three questions, and [pause] I just didn't want to do any of it, right? [laughs]

GK: Uh-huh, yes!

KS: What I kept writing was, “I don’t want to be here. I shouldn’t be here.” Things like that.

GK: Uh-huh.

KS: So that was definitely a moment as you were saying, that sometimes it’s not even a physical limitation—it’s some kind of emotional trauma that we’re going through at the moment, you know?

GK: Yes, yes. Mhmm.

KS: After that, when I experienced it personally, now I’m just like, “Okay. I really need to be careful with what I have my students do.” As in, *making* them do things.

GK: Mhmm. Mhmm.

KS: So definitely negotiation. I think that would definitely help.

GK: Yeah. I find it useful to be a student. You know, actually occasionally I enroll in adult ed classes. In other contexts, I might go to my yoga class or whatever instruction class I go to. Like when you resist, you know, yourself, so kind of just to notice that and then understand that that’s sort of part of how we interact, and of course you’ll see that in your classroom and to be mindful of, you know, the places we come from. So I think that’s good insight for you early on to learn. I mean it’s tough, but I think it helps you appreciate the range of what might be in front of you.

KS: Definitely. Made me so aware of it.

GK: You know, there’s a little book that I think I reference in one of the two articles. It’s called *Radical Presence* by Mary Rose O’ Reilly. It’s like 30... it’s not even a book. It’s a booklet, but it’s very powerful. She just talks about three or four teaching stories where she just listened. It’s really about the ability to listen and be present and just sort of how that transforms some teaching moments for her. It’s very engaging. It might be a nice little read to, you know, tough stuff with students, but just the ability to pause and invite them in and not guide it and see where it goes. I like that little book. I hadn’t thought about it, but when I was rereading these pieces I was like, “Yeah, that’s still so good.”

KS: I’ll definitely check it out.

GK: Yes, take a look. Yes.

KS: Thank you. So, I’m going to read Ben’s question.

GK: Yes.

KS: During the talk, you mentioned an example where a teacher says to the student, 80% of the project should be defining and understanding the problem, making sure that you have the right problem, so picking a topic. Then the 20% can be on the solution. In the writing program at SU, we do a lot of civic engagement with our students, and these classes are motivated and enriched by action. The possibilities of using writing as social action, that these sorts of classes also seem to perhaps fetishize action and in the process override our ability to do the strategic contemplation or mindful, thoughtful inquiry these important moments of community engagement require. Um, I'm wondering what thoughts you have on this possible tension between action as a motivation and mindfulness as a necessary part of responsible action.

GK: Yeah, that's a nice question. I like that question. Yes. So those 80-20, it might be even 90-10%, I really learned that from my business colleagues who teach a lot of design, come from kind of design spaces and what they call problem spaces, really thinking about what you are identifying as a problem. I think that's true in writing and research, and I think it's very important with civic engagement—really understanding the cultural context, the social context, the structural issues, you know, when you're looking at a space and pausing and not thinking, *Well I have the solution. I'm moving right in there*, but to kind of look at the larger framing of it. So if you look at design schools and some of the curriculum from like the Stanford school, they spend a lot of time like looking at a large area, you know, and thinking about the health space. Do you look at the hospital admissions process? Do you look at how people live? You know it can go all kinds of—it can lead you down to nutrition and diet, or it can help you identify a food desert in the city, if you have a high rate... So you're looking at where the issues are, you know, it's large in social spaces like that so you can move from the hospital admissions and emergency admissions rate to poverty, employment, and unemployment and nutrition and education. So you can have poverty... you know you can go into a large space.

So I think at some point, you do want to narrow into some space, but I think understanding the richness of these spaces is really important because otherwise you're just becoming sort of the imperial person moving in there maybe with good intentions but not with learning. I mean that's been a big critique of civic engagement and also in particular service learning where students just feel like, "Oh, I'm doing a good deed, and I'm helping out" without really making any profound difference or changing their understanding of how things work. I think it's a tension, but I think it's an important spot to pause.

I think I'd rather have my students understand the complexity of issues, and I'm thinking about Patrick's class right now. I was just visiting earlier where he teaches prison culture and the whole industrial prison complex in this country, which is very, very disturbing and complex. That concerns a lot of people. But rather than just rushing in and let's write a letter to the prisoner—you know, which they're doing a piece of it, too, but understanding the depths with which our society is dysfunctional. Incarceration rates, particularly for black men, you know, for a lot of reasons, but I think to undo that cycle is I mean that's a really big problem space, but yeah, I would.

KS: So what I hear you saying is that, so instead of focusing on positing a potential solution or going into these particular communities, it's better to do the exploration and kind of the inquiry into the larger societal systems that create the problems?

GK: I mean, I think an understanding there is necessary. I do believe in community work, so I'm not saying stay out of them. I would be very thoughtful of thinking about how you work with community members and inviting community members to see what their needs are and not going in and identifying it for them. So I think working in the local space is very important, but really as a true collaboration requires you to be able to change and adapt and move, you know, what you think you might have been doing. I know of one good example, a colleague at the University of Illinois [Urbana-Champaign]. He had some money. He was in the library studies program actually. They were working in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in Chicago and were willing to put some of their funding there—maybe grow the library or do this, but they understood that they were coming from the outside, from a school down south. So they invited community members, especially young people, to identify their needs, what they thought was useful, and they ended up doing very different projects. Their funds did not go to books. Some of them wanted to build more on their Puerto Rican heritage, and so they wanted to study their food and music and culture, and so they developed means of doing that. You know, so they had places where they could develop and practice their music. They developed a rooftop garden where they grew the ingredients necessary for some basic dishes. I mean, it really enriched the community. It's kind of the best example I could think of where somebody had the mindfulness to say, "We have a little bit of funds. We want to work with the community. We're interested in engaging. Let's work with the community to help us define that." Very cool project.

Now, I think the challenge is sort of with the semesters. I think our, at Bentley where I work, the service learning project, we have a pretty good center tries to have long-term relationships with community partners so that it's not just one in one out, and I think that can be the problem with that. But if you really have a commitment to the community or a certain center and you really work with them, help them identify their needs, where they want to put their priorities, then you get *true* collaboration and *really* exciting learning and *unpredictable* solutions develop. So I always think that's a really cool project.

KS: A big thank-you to Gesa Kirsch for taking out the time to sit down and chat with us, and to Patrick Berry for setting it up. Thanks again to all of our listeners for your continued support.

*Cue music: "Biomythos" by Revolution Void.*

BK: This Rhetorical Life is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program at Syracuse University. Executive producers of This Rhetorical Life are Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt, with additional production and editing from Karrieann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Seth Davis.