

JG: Hello, and welcome to episode six of the Writing Across Cottey project. Now, if you're new to Writing Across Cottey, this is an ongoing video series put on by Cottey's Writing Center where we talk to a faculty member from across the disciplines about their experiences with writing, their attitudes toward writing, and generally any writing advice that they would have for students in their discipline. So we are very happy to be joined today by Dr. Carol Clyde Gallagher, Associate Professor of organizational leadership here at Cottey. Thank you, Dr. Gallagher, for being here today.

CG: Thanks for having me.

JG: And we will just jump right in and get started with the interview. So my first question is a pretty general one. What kind of writing is done in your discipline?

CG: So in my discipline, we have—just like any other discipline, we have our research writing, so a lot of the information I use to keep up to date in my field comes from journals. So there's the scholarly writing, and students do that a little bit. We also do—in terms of leadership, so much of leadership is about communication. So whether it's the formal messages that are sent to the people that we're working with, or the less formal, personal writing that's done as reflective writing, that is a component as well. One of the components to leadership that a lot of people don't think about is how much internal looking and working that we do. So there's a lot of time spending—focusing students on who they are and what they're bringing to the process, and maybe what they need to work on and improve and get better at. So there's really a wide variety. So we'll do the formal academic, fancy, official writing, and that ranges all the way to homework assignments or reflective pieces where students are just digging deep into themselves.

JG: Why do you think it's important to be able to write well your discipline?

CG: You know, it's interesting. I think, when we think about leadership, leadership is ultimately a relationship. And that relationship comes between two people. And when there's not good, clear communication between those two or more people, it makes the process of leadership much more difficult to achieve. So when you can communicate—I talk to my students a lot typically further on in their education, but we talk about writing clearly and concisely. So you want to get that message across. But you need to do it in a very direct and understandable way, no matter who you're working with. I sit on Nevada City Council, and I work with somebody there, and I said, “Oh, I have this book you need to read!” And I loaned it to him. And he said, “Nope, that was just too much.” Right? So scholarly things sometimes are not the best way to get the word out when you're trying to lead in different environments. So if you're trying to lead in a community context, I think the key tends to be, what, a third grade writing level? I think. I'm not positive. But I think you need to be able to communicate in a way that you can be—you can effectively share information and get information back from a variety of people who have a variety of backgrounds. So while you need to engage in that scholarly type of communication, you also need to engage in communication that is just every day and practical. And I see—again, I'm going to go to my experience in a leadership role. I get communications all the time, and it ranges from very formal information from our city attorney and the legal information I'm getting all the way to the email that somebody sent because they were mad about a new street sign we put up, or

whatever the case may be. And I think you see when you're getting that information, you see the effectiveness vary between people who can communicate a message well and people who just put every thought in their head onto a piece of paper. And it makes it harder to be effective when you're not a good communicator, and the written piece is huge in that.

JG: What you're saying really reminds me of the concept of audience that we talk about so much in First-Year Writing Seminar and Writing 102. You've got to know your audience, and you've got to know the rhetorical approach and the writing approach that's going to work on this audience. You know, different audiences have different needs and ability levels, knowledge levels, and you as the writer have to be very in tune with that.

CG: Absolutely. Well, and I do assignment sheets for all of my assignments. And it's funny you mentioned that because I've got a whole piece in there. And my assignment sheet was built from a former colleague in the Writing Center, who said, "Well, let me share an assignment sheet with you." So I talk about audience and I talk about expectations, because I do think that audience is important. How I communicate to somebody that I've never met before is very different than I communicate to a student that's had me for four years, and whether that's in verbal or written, and I think there's a lot of connection between those two forms of communication. But again, it's that thinking back to, "Who am I trying to communicate to, and what's the best way to do that?"

JG: Right. So what specific writing skills would you say are important for writing in your discipline? Besides audience awareness.

CG: Sure, I think, you know, when we talk on the one end about the scholarly writing, you need to be able to pay attention to whatever—for my discipline, it's—we use APA style. So—and I think a lot of students get overwhelmed because they think they have to be an expert and know APA style by heart in their head. I have to look up in my cheat sheets on a regular basis. I can cite a book from memory and I can cite a journal article from memory, but everything else I have to look up.

JG: Me, too.

CG: And I think so often, when we talk about writing in a certain style, we just expect that everything—like, you just have to know everything. And I remember the last time I was taking classes, I had to write in a different style. So I had to do some adjustments and adaptations, and there's not a ton of differences between the different writing styles. There are small intricacies. And what I also tell my students is I don't expect perfection; I expect you to make progress and to do well. I teach sometimes for another school, a graduate level class, and I still see mistakes in my graduate students. And it's a process for all of us as we work. I promise when I write an article and I get it back from the editors, I promise you I have some APA mistakes in my writing. I try not to, but they still happen, and I think we're always seeking progress over perfection. We don't—you don't have to be perfect. So there's the technical piece. And I think part of the reason why I think the technical piece is so important is because life is all about meeting expectations, whether it's the expectations of a family member, of a supervisor, of a community, of a co worker, whatever that is. And I think when—my mindset at least is, when we're

meeting the expectations of a certain style of writing, we're showing that we're able to meet expectations, whatever they are that are laid out in front of us. Does that make sense?

JG: Yeah, it does.

CG: So you go into a job and your boss says, "Here's the six things you have to do." And I kind of think of that as the styles that we use in writing. It's frustrating, and it takes a little bit longer, but it gets us into some discipline, and it gets us into a consistent way of doing something. And that's one of the things I appreciate about it. So that's on the really formal scholarly side. You know, I'm a less formal—which is—honestly, most of the writing that's done in my classes is more reflective and contemplative writing. And I think the most important piece there is a willingness to go back and review what we've read. As a student, I always told myself that I did my very best work at the last minute. I'm sure, Jon, you have—or sorry, Dr. Green, you've had some students like that as well. And I was—I have always had that philosophy. And then in graduate—one of my more recent graduate experiences, I turned a paper in a couple weeks early, and it was such a freeing, nice, amazing, amazing feeling. I started to understand why students would do that. But I think that idea that we do our best work at the last minute should never give us the excuse to not proofread. And too often, what I see from students is they don't take the time to sit down and go back and reread what they've already written to make sure that it makes sense, to make sure that they are not usually using casual language, right? So it—and I think in written language, it's more formal, it's more structured. Not that you have to use big fancy words all the time, but you're not going to say, "You know how that goes." That's not necessarily the way you want to effectively communicate information. So I think my biggest thing—my biggest piece of advice for students in my discipline is really thinking about, "Have I made my point, and did I make it clear to somebody who hasn't necessarily read the exact same thing I read?"

JG: Yeah, I think a lot of novice writers assume that quote/unquote "good" writers never make mistakes, and they just get it right the first time. And I try to say, you know, "They do." It's just, they do what you say: go back and clean it up and polish it. Right? It's like, you know, I asked my wife, "Why are you never wrong?" And she says, "Well, I don't talk unless I know I'm right. I don't say anything unless I know I'm right." So it's kind of like that. It's not that the people are not—or that the expert, experienced writers are not making mistakes. It's that they are putting in that effort to polish things. Polish the draft before putting it in front of the audience.

CG: Absolutely. And I think Anne Lamott makes some good points on that when she wrote her piece on "Shitty First Drafts," right?

JG: One of my favorites.

CG: And we talk about that in my classes, because I think there is—so many students that I work with have this expectation of perfection. We reframe it in my class, so they're not perfectionists. They're recovering from that. They're recovering perfectionists. But you know, when you have that perfectionist tendency, you tend to procrastinate for a different reason than I do. Right? You do it because you want to have an absolutely perfect submission. And I promise you, every single journal that I have—journal article I've turned in or other type of professional work that I've turned in, I've had to do multiple revisions. That's—I love the iterative process. So we finish something and then we get some feedback

and then we revise it, and that's iteration. And I love that piece of education because we're constantly learning. And I—had I expected that my dissertation would be perfect for the very first time I turned in, you know, the final—all the chapters, I would have been sadly disappointed, because that's also an iterative process. And I think so much of education is about that iteration. And we don't talk about that.

JG: That reminds me of—my dissertation advisor told me at one point, “The best dissertation is a done dissertation.” You know? So what you say about chasing perfection. You know, one of my favorite teaching mantras is, “Don't let perfect be the enemy of good. Or be the opposite of good.” Because you're not going to get that perfection, and you can very easily paralyze yourself or hit this writer's block if you chase that perfection and you're not happy with just good.

CG: Absolutely, absolutely. And I think part of that—we spend a lot of time in my classes talking about how we frame things. So part of it is how we're framing it. You know, are you framing it that you have to be absolutely perfect? Or are you framing it that you're turning in something that can be better next time because you're going to learn from the experience? And education all along the process should be a learning experience, and it's about not just learning a new subject, but learning how we manage the information we get back and how we grow and develop as we get better in the process. I am a much better student now in my life than I was when I was a first year student in college. And that doesn't make me a bad person back when I was a first year student in college. It just means that I've grown and I've developed, and I'm much more open to the revisions and the redoing that comes with education.

JG: And it is a process. And you've never reached that end. You never reach the end of the process. I can say that, you know, as someone who is a very experienced writer, I still don't feel like I've, you know, reached the summit where I have no—nothing to improve upon. You talk to experts in any skill or discipline, and they'll tell you the same thing. You know, “I still have so much to learn.” So what has been—what do you think has been the most important thing you've learned about writing in your discipline?

CG: So I think in my discipline—and I think my discipline more than many—there are some that fall into this, too—my discipline is really tricky in that we have probably more material in the popular—so there's two kinds of spaces where you can publish. You can publish in the popular press where, you know, it's the novels that everybody wants to read. It's the fun—the popular press is the fun stuff. And then you have the scholarly press, which is the not fun stuff. The textbooks, the journals, the articles, the monographs. And leadership in particular is an area where we've definitely got the disciplines, and the beauty of my discipline is that it is a truly multidisciplinary space. So I've got colleagues who work in communication or in philosophy or in business or in human development or in education. And so it's a beautiful discipline because it's made up of so many other disciplines, and nobody really owns leadership. But then on the other side, we have the popular press, and most of those are—many of those are opinion pieces that become bestsellers, and there may be some truth to them, and there may be absolutely nothing other than somebody's opinion. And so I think sometimes it's hard to balance those in my classes. I'm always trying to balance—you know, I need that scholarly work, but boy do the students like the popular press books a whole lot more. So—and there's some great books that have come out where authors and scholars are intentionally choosing to be more—and this gets—so I really am getting back to your question. I think, for me, one of the challenges that we have in leadership is that

we have so much great material in the scholarly side that is inaccessible because nobody wants to sit down and read a textbook. You don't read textbooks for fun. The textbook I use for my organizational change class, oh my gosh, every organization that's going to deal with a change should have to go through this process because that's what makes it work. But nobody wants to read the textbook for fun. So I think in my discipline, more than many—because everybody intersects with leadership, whether you're an actual leader or you're just involved in the process somewhere, we are all impacted by leadership. So we all care about it to varying degrees. And I think making that connection and providing resources that are accessible and not overwhelmed with the scholarly side but find a way to balance those two pieces is really, really important for my discipline.

JG: Interesting, yeah. Even I don't like to read textbooks.

CG: I don't.

JG: My students might find that surprising, but. All right. Last question. What advice would you have for a student looking to improve their writing in your discipline?

CG: You know, I really think practice makes perfect, I think for so many of us, and myself included. I joined a professional writing group. So it's a group of people, and we're all writing for different things. Most of us write in the in the realm of leadership. But we have—I have a dean of a graduate school that's writing a cookbook, or there's a number of coaches that are working on a private publication type of work. So there's a wide variety, but I think part of it is having a community that supports you and to recognize that it is a process and that writing—you are not—I am a much better writer now, even though I still question, “Oh, is this good? Am I making my point? Is this okay?” I think that's part of the process, but I also know that I have to remind myself that I've been in school for a little while. I know a little bit about writing. No, I'm not a writing teacher, but I do it enough and I practice it enough and I work on it. And the more I practice, the better I get. It's like any kind of muscle memory. You know, the more you run, the better you're going to get, the more distance you'll get. The more you write, the better you're going to get, the more comfortable it gets. I can sit down—and I'm going to go back to the style piece—I can sit down to write an APA paper, and I've got little shortcuts that I use to make that process faster. It doesn't mean that I'm not using it; it means that I found some things that work for me. But it also—the more you do it, the easier it gets. I force students to do citations because the sooner we get used to putting those into what we're writing, the easier it gets, and then it just becomes a second—like it's just an afterthought. It's not even something that we have to think about and worry about anymore.

JG: I think that has come up in every single one of these interviews that we've done, this idea of practicing. And you know, in my experience, a lot of people—not even students, but people—don't think of writing as a practice-able thing in the same way that they do, say, music or sports. They think it's very much either you have it or you don't, you were born with it or you weren't. And if you weren't born with it, there's no hope for you. You can't get better at it. And so it is really refreshing, I think, to hear from you and other experienced writers who say that, “You know, we used to be novices, too. We weren't always at the experience level that we are now.” So just like anything else, it is a process; it does get easier with practice. Maybe not easy. I don't think writing is ever easy. But when you said you

found these strategies that work for you, that is what it's all about. It's just trying things out. Maybe this clustering or webbing strategy doesn't work for you, or maybe it's the most useful thing you've ever found. Outlining, you know, annotated bibliography, you know, you just have to kind of experiment.

CG: I'm laughing because I—so I require an outline in a couple of my classes, and my students get a little nervous, and they're not sure what I'm looking for. And I have literally sat down—I'm still in touch with my high school English teacher—and I have literally sat down and sent her messages multiple times just saying, “Thank you so much for forcing us to learn how to outline.” Like, I can't—the last graduate program I went through—and I just got done a year ago. But the—I outlined for every paper because that's—to me, it just it makes so much sense and it works. And my students, “I don't get it. I don't understand.” So sometimes it's also playing with other things. The other thing I was going to say—I'm sorry, I should have said this before—but the other thing I was going to say is, “It's okay to have people look at your work.” And I think the number of students that—I encourage students to go—and the Writing Center is what I'm talking about. But I mean, at every level, we still get people to look at our work. I needed to send something out to a colleague a week or two ago, and I was like, “I'd really like to have”—it's for a committee work that I'm doing. And I said, “You know, I'd really like to have somebody look at this before I send it just to make sure I'm—things are good.” And I got some great feedback. And there's—two eyes are always better than one, and I also think you get to a point whenever you're working on something—now this is much more true of a 160 page dissertation than a two page reflective paper, but there's—once you're close enough to something, you're going to start missing things. So let somebody else look. Let somebody else take—or take advantage of the Writing Center and the resource of having somebody who knows what they're doing look at what you have.

JG: And that's an important thing to emphasize is that you never outgrow the need for that. You never reach a point where you are so good, so perfect, that you would not benefit from having someone else take a look at your writing.

CG: Yep, absolutely.

JG: Well, I thought this was very illuminating. Thank you very much, Dr. Gallagher, for your insightful answers about this. So we will be posting the recording of this episode along with the transcript on the Writing Center website, and we will also be sharing that via email with the campus community when it is ready to go. So you know, be—stay tuned for additional episodes of the Writing Across Cottey project, and please don't forget about the Writing Center. Don't forget that we are open Monday through Thursday, 6 to 9pm in the Kolderie Center, and we can help you with any stage of the writing process, whether that is getting started or, like we were just talking about, getting that extra set of eyes and proofreading or revising at the very end of things. We can help you at any stage; just come on in, no appointment necessary. So thank you once again, Dr. Gallagher, for being here for this episode, and stay tuned for the next episode of Writing Across Cottey. Thank you.