Episode 130: Steven W. Hopkins
Pedagogue podcast
Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, Stephen W. Hopkins talks about teaching at Brigham Young University Idaho, multimodality, metacognition, and reflective teaching practices and transfer.

Stephen W. Hopkins is a faculty member of the English Department at Brigham Young University Idaho, where he teaches first year writing, creative writing, and visual rhetoric.

Steven, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Can you talk about your institutional context, where you teach and what you teach, and how you approach teaching writing?

SH: Sure, yeah, great. Here at Brigham Young University in Idaho—you've probably heard of Brigham Young University in Provo—we're part of the same church education system, so it's a private university run by the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Very much in a Christian context, very much suffused with that kind of things. In a classroom context, we start class with prayer and things like that, and so that creates some pretty interesting context for thinking about writing and the teaching of writing. I mean, basically you could call it an open enrollment university. Our acceptance rate is like 98% or something like that. The main thing that we get here is just a huge variety of students. I get students in my first-year writing class who are ready for grad school. I get some who are struggling to do anything. And so that wide range, and then this context of being a church school creates a lot of interesting dynamics to be thinking about in terms of creating curriculum and what I should focus on and what kind of assignments to give and stuff like that. I guess my overall teaching philosophy is, a lot of it comes…is pedagogy of the present, the idea of meeting them where they're at, figuring out where you're at, and how can we take a few steps forward from where you're at, rather than saying, "Here's the standard of curriculum and everybody has to be here." It's helping them diagnose where they're at themselves and see how they can take steps forward. That's kind of the main thing that I'm focusing on.

SW: So thinking about your context, what assignments or practices do you draw on in first-year writing that students really respond well to?

SH: Yeah, yeah, great. There's two of them that I work on and I get a lot of good feedback from students. One is an email etiquette scenario thing. What I do is I create these situations and they're based in kind of a corporate environment because I think a lot of them imagine themselves as writers in some sort of corporate environment in the future. That's not true for all of them, but we do four of them an email up, an email down, an email across, and an email out. We start talking about power dynamics and power hierarchies and how those are affecting their languages. I feel like we're taking pretty sophisticated ideas of language and we're kind of

boiling them down to how do you write an email? It's this very boots on the ground kind of a thing.

For example, one situation is like you're a boss and you have a sales team underneath you. Because of Covid, the people who do the warehouse inventory, they all got fired, and so you have to tell the sales force, "You have to come in on Wednesday to do this inventory and I can't pay you overtime." You have to write the email to your workers to do that. What happens is they all turn them in, and we use Canvas as our learning management system, and I do basically all-digital, so they don't turn in any paper. What I'll do is I use Loom to record myself cold reacting to their emails. One will come up and I'll read it out loud and I'll say, "Okay, well here's what I like about this, and here's what I don't like about this, and say, "If I were in this situation and I read these instructions, I would feel like I could get out of this if I didn't have to go," or something like that. I call it "method reading."

I'm pretending to be these workers and how they would receive it, and then think about in terms of the power dynamic of where I'm at and where they're at, and how I would be responding to their language and show them this is what your language is doing for the person receiving it. We do that I'd say four times throughout the semester, and I've gotten a lot of really great feedback from students to just see what it's like for their emails to go to a person and how that person would receive it on the other end. Then what I have them do after they watch that is they kind of distill. I use a website called random.org, and I put all the people that turned it in and I hit randomize, and whoever's name it is, I pull it up and I read. So I'll read four or five of them, and then from there I say, "Okay, write me 250 words distilling what you heard. What should you always do and never do in an email down situation?" Because of the university that I'm at, I can't be talking about emic and etic and using all these academic words to describe the rhetorical situation that we're in and stuff. I just say, "Put it in your words."

SW: Steven, your teaching and research interest also include multimodality and metacognition. Do you teach video or audio-based projects or skills in first-year writing? And then also, what kinds of metacognitive activities do you use in first-year writing? I know your dissertation at Arizona State explored reflective teaching practices.

SH: Yeah, you sent me that question. I did talk about it a lot in my dissertation. I was really excited about it in 2017 when I was writing about it. My first job out of grad school was at a place where they had a combined communications and English department. That was really great because I could teach video editing, I could teach podcasting, I could teach alongside just first-year writing classes and stuff like that. But the more I figured out that if I'm teaching a writing class, the skills of video editing and podcasting editing and stuff like that, they don't transfer in the same way. If you want to practice writing, you have to practice writing, and you have to get feedback on your writing and your paragraphs and your sentences and things like that. As much as I wish there were a universal composition way of going about things, it doesn't seem to work out that way the way that I thought it was going to. I was really excited about it, writing my dissertation. That's something I want to explore more in the future. But if I do teach video editing, it's because it's a video editing class or a podcasting class.

One thing that really hit me as really important in my first-year writing class I just started to notice is the idea of metacognitive practices with my students. Okay, you wrote that that's an experience you had. Now let's make sense of it. Write about it. What was good about it? What was bad about it? What could you learn? How do you think you're going to transfer this? Where do you see yourself using these skills? Prompting them to ask these questions and go through a lot of the work that's being done on the idea of transfer and using the skills that we gain in writing classes and how they're going to apply later. You kind of have to consciously make that apparent to the students that that's a thing they should be doing, is asking themselves, "Why do these skills matter? Where are they going to be used later? Because it doesn't seem to naturally happen. If we take that practice, metacognitive reflection, we put it on top of our teaching, now, it becomes incumbent on us as teachers to ask ourselves the same question. What's going well in this writing assignment? We grade our papers, and sometimes if an assignment goes badly and we're enduring these hours and hours of giving notes on papers and we are suffering through it, that should be a signal to us that we need to rethink what we're doing. What's going wrong in these assignments? What could I be doing differently? And so, I do that.

I ask my students constantly throughout the semester, "How could I be doing this better?" I'm asking them the question of, "If you could go back to the beginning of this assignment and give yourself advice, what would you do differently?" And that kind of helps both of us. If I were a teacher, how should I be doing this differently to better prepare them for the end product that they're going to create or the system of the scaffolding to get them through it and all that kind of stuff. This constant searching for where am I getting this wrong, or where could I be doing this better, or what am I not understanding? Where am I not meeting student? That's a better way to put it. Where am I not meeting students on their level so that they can understand what I'm trying to get out of them and what I want them to learn and experience, and how can I better shape that experience for them so they get what I want them to get out of it?

SW: Steven, how are you building this knowledge of transfer in your writing class? For example, are you having conversations with students about transferring knowledge from first-year writing to, say, the sciences, or do you have specific assignments that help students capture how knowledge can transfer from one space to another?

SH: Yeah, that's a great question. Another activity that I've been doing for the last couple of semesters is I have them write at the very beginning of the semester what I call resilience predictions. I have them write down, what's the five biggest obstacles you think you're going to run into this semester and what five strategies can you come up with to overcome those obstacles? There's this idea that first-year writing is kind of the homeroom of the university. I don't know if you've ever heard that phrase before, but that idea of we get to interact so intimately with our students. We have few of them in our classroom, and we ask them to be vulnerable with us and show us these writing assignments, and we're asking them to write personal narratives a lot of the time and be open to exploring their identities with us. Because of that, I feel like it's kind of incumbent on me as that person in their life to help them start to sort through this idea of, how do I be a student—especially at my university where it's almost all first year or first-generation students—how do you be a student? How do you be an adult? How do you work when you don't want to work? How do you allow yourself to be vulnerable when you don't want to write a piece of writing and you have to turn it in that day?

Those are all life skills that are super difficult. So, I try to name them. I have them do this resilience predictions thing, and then two-thirds of the way through the semester, I have them go back and reread it and then write another reflective piece on where you were wrong, and that kind of a thing. Again, this metacognitive reflection, even just being a student and turning in homework. I don't really use the word transfer. I don't know if I'm telling them directly that is transfer, but we're going through those process of constantly asking yourself these questions. How am I doing, and where could I be doing better? So, on top of writing, there's this transfer of skills of just being a student that I'm hopefully guiding them through as well.

SW: Thanks, Steven. And thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.