

## Episode 148: Alex Evans

Pedagogue podcast

*Transcript*

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

In this episode, Alex Evans talks about disciplinary history and archives, multimodality, teaching at two-year colleges, and neurodiversity and critical distraction.

Alex Evans is a PhD student in rhetoric and composition at the University of Cincinnati, where he is a two-time nominee and one-time winner of the William C. Boyce Award for Teaching Excellence. His research centers on materiality and embodiment, writing program administration, archives, and the history of writing studies in two-year colleges. He's an editorial assistant for programmatic perspectives and has taught writing classes at Cincinnati State Community and Technical College and Jefferson Community and Technical College. His scholarly work is forthcoming in teaching English in the two-year college, and the collection, teaching community college and historically underserved students innovative, inclusive, and compassionate pedagogy.

Alex, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: Your teaching and research interests are in disciplinary history, archives, and multimodality. Can you talk more about your approach to teaching first-year writing at the University of Cincinnati?*

AE: Yeah, absolutely. So I always really struggle to articulate my research interests when people ask because I think for most of us as compositionist who teach first-year writing, we kind of have to be generalists. A lot of my mentors in the field and the people I admire most have written on a bunch of different topics and kind of work intuitively following the areas that they're passionate about. And that tends to be how I work well. But the common themes that keep coming back in my work do seem to focus on disciplinary history, working in archives, specifically of the field and writing instructional archives, and then multimodality, both in my teaching and within that historical work as well.

Thinking about that in terms of first-year writing is a little bit odd because first-year writing generally isn't a class where we delve into archives or do that kind of thing, and I've experimented with that a little bit. I definitely want to give a shout-out to the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives, which is just a fantastic project. If you teach literacy narratives in a first-year writing class, it's a great place to look for examples for your students. I often use it as kind of a publication opportunity almost for students when they finish writing a literacy narrative. If they want to see it out in the world, that's a way that they can get their work out there.

But for the most part, the work that composition researchers and archives do and the work that we do in first-year writing feels really, really distant. But for me, I tend to see them as pretty intertwined in part because I tend to think of things from the ground up. When I first came into teaching first-year writing, I was a creative writer and I didn't really understand what the class

was for and why we were doing it. And it turns out that that's a pretty common thing in composition. We have a lot of different reasons for teaching first-year writing, and sometimes they contradict with each other, sometimes they cohere nicely.

But over time, especially our ideas about what the freshmen composition classes have changed significantly, and I think being able to dig back into that disciplinary history and think about why do we have a writing requirement for all students is something that's impacted my pedagogy a lot and allowed me just to see connections with the work that we do in first-year writing with the rest of the project of higher education and especially kind of democracy and action in higher education. And that's the primary connection I think I see between those things. But with multimodality especially, my hope with that in my first-year writing classes is to see the way that students can make connections between the kind of communication they do on a daily basis, whether that's through social media or personal communication, communication in other classes, and the kinds of analytical tools we might use in the composition classroom in formats that make more sense to them.

So in my first-year writing classes at the University of Cincinnati, we have a multimodal recast assignment that's built into our curriculum where students take their research and turn it into some format other than formal academic writing. And I love that assignment so much because suddenly students start to use some of the rhetorical strategies that maybe they've been struggling to understand all semester. They start to do that intuitively because they know this isn't the way that I would phrase this idea in a TikTok or in a YouTube video or in a podcast, because they know those forms a little bit better. So I think there's such value to that kind of multimodal work in opening students' eyes to the value of the work that we do as compositionist and the value of a rhetorical education.

*SW: You mentioned literacy narratives and archives as well as a multimodal assignment. Is there an assignment that you feel like complements and help center your pedagogical values?*

AE: Yeah, absolutely. So I think, especially thinking of this idea of pedagogical values, something that's really important to me in teaching first-year writing is helping students to grow more confident in a personal voice and occupy a personal identity as a researcher. So often students come in without necessarily a sense of what they want to study or why they want to study it, and I really hope that first-year writing can be a space for students to try some things out even if they're not completely successful in those research projects. So I build my first-year writing classes a lot around individual inquiry. Because of that, my classes tend to function less around full group activities and lectures and things like that. I do a ton of student conferencing because often students are working on radically different projects depending on their goals and their interests. And this actually ties in really nicely with the archival work I was talking about before. Because so often I'll come to these ideas intuitively, if I have students working on a bunch of different projects, it's really hard to lecture or do activities that are useful for the whole group. So I start dividing things up a little bit. I start doing more individual work.

When I started doing that, I didn't really have a model for it necessarily. I knew other people in my department were doing student conferences, and I thought I'll just do more of that and maybe make them a little bit shorter and do them in class. But as I've dug back into the history of the

field, there are so many moments of people doing that kind of work. I'm working on a research article right now about Roger Garrison, who is a two-year college English teacher from the late '40s to the '80s. And he had this whole method of teaching that was focused on really, really short conferencing and a student-teacher relationship that looked more like professional writers and editors, kind of in a newsroom together, bouncing ideas back and forth between each other but mostly working independently.

And it was such a funny moment for me seeing that reflected in his writing 50 or so years ago and thinking, "Oh, he came to the same thing that I did 50 years later." The same impulse towards students doing individual projects and then getting editorial feedback from a teacher along the way I think is really, really valuable. The way that I've implemented that in my classrooms definitely looks different than a writing classroom in the 1970s. But I think the value of that kind of discursive feedback is really, really important for students because so often the feedback that they get is just red marks on a piece of paper or a marked up rubric or something like that. And the idea that feedback can come in the form of questions and can come in the form of conversation, I think opens students up to an idea of revision that's a lot more expansive. And I just think that's so, so valuable, especially for students in a first-year writing class who are learning how to be college students and learning how to be in an academic discipline.

*SW: You mentioned this Roger Garrison article situated at a two-year college. You are currently teaching at Cincinnati State Community and Technical College and Jefferson Community and Technical College. You are also on the planning committee for the National TYCA Conference. Talk to me more about your work within two-year colleges.*

AE: I came to two-year colleges kind of by accident. My master's degree is in creative writing. And when I finished that degree, I didn't really know what I wanted to do, but I was pretty sure I didn't want to do more grad school, which is a thing that has since changed. But at the time, the director of the composition program at University of Cincinnati said, "Hey, would you stay on as an adjunct? We need instructors right now and I'd really like to have you stay." And I decided to do that, but needed more hours teaching somewhere to fill out my schedule and happened to see a job ad for a community college down the street looking for first-year writing instructors.

In my interview for that job, the chair of the English Department, I think in an effort to calm my nerves about teaching in a new context, said, "Oh, our students here at the two-year college are exactly the same as the students that you teach at the big research university down the street. Everything you know about teaching will totally apply here. You'll be absolutely fine." And it turns out that that wasn't the case. Two-year colleges are a pretty different context. And as kind as that introduction was and as much faith as she put in my teaching abilities after two years as a graduate teaching assistant, that first semester teaching at a two-year college was extremely difficult. Just the material realities of what was available to students on campus, what students' lives looked like outside of the classroom was really strikingly different.

I was used to teaching 18-year-olds in a competitive admission research university, and I went to teaching mostly non-traditional students who were mostly part-time, most of them had full-time jobs, families. A lot of them didn't have computers, didn't have smartphones. So just some of that kind of technological infrastructure in the classroom was a real challenge. And I think that

experience has really propelled me in my teaching a lot to think about two-year colleges not as a corner of the field that has very little crosstalk with the rest of the field, but as the place that ought to be the center.

Because for me, I thought I was a decent first-year writing instructor in a research university, and as soon as I went to a two-year college, I started to see all of the flaws in my teaching, all of the things that I wasn't actually that good at explaining, my students just had some prior knowledge of it that they could apply. They had some of these academic writing skills already. They had some technological know-how that they could bring into the classroom. And as soon as it was all on me to do that instruction, I realized I'm not actually as good of a teacher as I thought I was at some of this material. So teaching in a two-year college has, I think, helped me to be a better writing teacher in a lot of other contexts. It's made me a lot more mindful of student situations outside of the classroom and the way that I bring in accessibility into the classroom, the way that I prioritize students' voices in the classroom. All of that I think comes from working in two-year colleges and realizing that the status quo at a research university doesn't translate as well to other contexts as some of us might like to believe.

*SW: Is there something specific that you assumed or expected about teaching that had to shift or change given the move from an R1 context to a two-year college? I'm not thinking about this in terms of pedagogical failure, we're always learning, adapting, growing as teachers. I'm thinking about this more so through how your understanding of teaching and your pedagogical awareness increased given these experiences teaching.*

AE: Yeah, absolutely. And I appreciate that reframing because I think we all should be growing from our pedagogical missteps or the things we overlook at times. I have so many of them I think. But I've gotten so much more flexible in my course designs and my assignment designs because of teaching at a two-year college. And one of the things that really spurred that on, our curriculum at the two-year college doesn't include any multimodal composing at all. I primarily teach our co-requisite writing course that's designed for developmental writers. And often in that class, students are struggling with the technology as much as they are struggling with writing or reading skills in the classroom.

But my first semester teaching, I tried to carry over some of the curriculum that I taught at the university and brought in a multimodal assignment with very little scaffolding to it, thinking that all of my students would be very used to creating visual media online, creating social media, doing that kind of work in the classroom and on their own. And very quickly realized when I got blank stares from the room that not only were students not used to doing that kind of work, didn't have much experience doing that kind of work, they physically didn't have the tools to do it. I had students who were relying only on campus computer labs to do their work or some students who were doing all of their work on a phone. So the idea of them putting together a podcast or putting together an infographic or something had way, way more challenges along the way than it did for my students at the university who all showed up on the first day with brand-new laptops on their desk and smartphones in their pocket, and this real significant literacy in creating multimodal texts.

*SW: This is my last question. You're doing research on neurodiversity and critical distraction. Can you talk more about that work?*

AE: Yeah, absolutely. So this idea really, it grew organically around a panel that I was a part of for the CCCC Conference in Chicago this year. Initially, I was invited to be on that panel by Chris Carter, who I mentioned earlier, and Laura Micciche at the University of Cincinnati, along with a few other grad students, Katie Monthie and Andy Cheng. And when we first decided to do a panel together, we knew we wanted to do something kind of around teacher researcher identity, maybe around reflection. And Laura is the one who brought in this idea of mindfulness. We initially met Laura very kindly, had sent out a few different materials and notes and things to all of us beforehand. I was much less prepared than she was. But one of the things that she sent out was a quote from the introduction to Ellen Carillo's *A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading*. And throughout our whole first meeting, I just kept coming back to this quote because in it, Carillo describes what it means to be mindful as a writer and a reader. And she says, "When you are mindful, you are in the moment, you are not distracted or focused on anything else."

I just kept coming back to that line and thinking about this as a pedagogical tool, and especially thinking of it in terms of my own work because I very rarely live up to that model of not being distracted or not being focused on anything else. And I think that's true for most of us, regardless of our circumstances or whether we're students or teachers, we're distracted most of the time. I brought in neurodiversity to this because I'm neurodivergent, I'm diagnosed with a DHD. Because of that, I'm a pretty distracted person a lot of the time. So this idea of entering a mindful state when I go about my work just seemed like an impossibility. It seemed like something that was never going to happen for me. And I have a lot of neurodivergent students as well. The idea of starting off a class with mindfulness felt like a barrier before we even get to the reading or the writing or any of that.

So over the months of prepping this panel, I kept turning over these ideas and thinking about them a lot. The place that I ended up was looking at this idea of neuroqueerness, this which I got from a fantastic article by J. Logan Smilges, I hope that's the correct pronunciation, who defined that term as the power of neurodivergence to disrupt or subvert normative expectations for cognitive or intellectual functioning. And I thought that that felt like such a powerful concept in relation to distraction because so often, the way that distraction gets framed, especially in the writing classroom, is as this entirely negative thing, this thing that we want to avoid. We want to be that model of mindfulness, and distraction has no place in it. And I hear that in the way my students talk about their own writing processes as well. So often I'll meet with students for a conference and they'll say, "I am not as far on this project as I wanted to be. I got really distracted along the way." It's always this negatively coded thing.

But for myself, at least, I mentioned earlier, I'm really a generalist and I kind of follow my nose when it comes to research areas, and a lot of that's a distraction. I found myself looking into archives because anytime they came up, I got interested and started looking in that direction. Same with multimodal composing. Every time I would see it come up in something, I would be following that line. So I think there's a real power to distraction that gets ignored, but I think certainly for neurodivergent scholars, we know that and just intuitively, in ourselves, distraction is often the thing that's fueling our work, that's fueling our interests.

That's really how I came to this idea of critical distraction, which I've tentatively defined as recognizing and embracing the importance of distraction in the process of learning, because I think distraction is something that's a lot more relatable to all of us. So if we're trying to think about out any sort of mindful approach to teaching or mindful approach to writing, starting with that mindfulness that's free of distraction feels like a pretty tall order. But if we start with distraction, we can start to understand ourselves a little bit better, understand our research a little bit better. I think it also allows us to be kinder to ourselves and our students.

Since working on this, whenever I meet with students and they say, "Oh, I got distracted and didn't get as much done as I expected to," instead of saying, "Oh, well, we all get distracted, but you've got to try and focus," I started asking them about, "Oh, what distracted you? What's the thing that caught your attention that wasn't this?" And it's led to some really interesting discussions. It's helped some of my students actually find research areas that they're more interested in because they can't pay attention to the thing that they thought they were going to write about that, they thought was a good topic to write about. But instead, they keep looking at this other topic, they keep on looking at this other material, and maybe that's what they should be working on, is the distraction.

So it's all in very early stages, but I'm really interested in the affordances of distraction as a writing strategy in the classroom. And I'm especially interested in reframing distraction as something that isn't negative, but something that can be really productive as a learning strategy, as a research strategy, both for professionals in the field and for our students.

*SW: Thanks, Alex, and thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.*