

## **Episode 157: Alex Tallant**

Pedagogue podcast

*Transcript*

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

Pedagogue launched in 2019 with the goal of amplifying perspectives and experiences on teaching writing across institutions. For the most part, I feel like the podcast has promoted a wide range of perspectives across post-secondary education contexts. Starting out, my hope was for Pedagogue to be a platform that fills gaps in more traditional alphabetic scholarship, which often privileges teachers situated in more research-intensive universities that have space and time to publish. I wanted the podcast to be a space that embraces and showcases experiences and knowledges from all types of classrooms, for us to consider and think about what teaching writing looks like, what it means to teach writing in different contexts, from two-year colleges to Historically Black Colleges and Universities, to Hispanic-Serving Institutions, to private colleges, to small liberal arts colleges, to large and small public universities.

Through all these episodes, there's still something missing. The voices and perspectives of teachers at Tribal Colleges and Universities. I taught basic writing and first year composition at a Tribal College as an adjunct for almost two years, and those students and classrooms impacted my perception and understanding of teaching more than any other context. There are currently 32 fully accredited Tribal Colleges and Universities in the United States, serving approximately 30,000 full-time and part-time students according to the US Department of Education. This is the eighth episode in a 10-week series that highlights tribal colleges and universities.

In this episode, Alex Tallant talks about teaching at Navajo Technical University, developmental writing, literacy narratives, indigenous approaches to teaching, and what he wished people knew about Tribal Colleges and Universities.

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Alex Tallant is an assistant professor of developmental English at Navajo Technical University. He has over 20 years experience teaching and working with Native American students of all ages. He served as the director of Project Venture for the National Indian Youth Leadership Project for five years where he taught outdoor and experiential learning activities to Navajo and Pueblo young people.

Alex, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: You teach at Navajo Technical University. Can you talk more about your institutional context?*

AT: Sure. I teach in Crown Point, New Mexico, which is on the Navajo Reservation. I live about 60 miles away and I commute. I've been teaching at Navajo Tech for 15 to 20 years, and I've been working in various learning environments with native people for almost 25 years now. It's been a blessing in my life. The people have taken care of me and I don't think I could have fit in many other places. But anyway, back to the nitty-gritty, our students are probably 98% Navajo. We do have a branch campus on the Zuni Reservation, and the Zuni people, I believe, want to start their own tribal college, so they're kind of piggybacking with us. I do have some Zuni students, but mostly Navajo, a small percentage of African American. Most of them have been married into Navajo families. Once in a blue moon, we get a white person. We have a very diverse faculty.

We're a STEM school, and I'm in the humanities, so the part that our president's really trying to develop STEM research-oriented university. We have people from all over the world, from the Middle East, from Africa, from India teaching the STEM courses, primarily. In my department, we've got across the branch campuses, maybe 10 or 12 people that teach writing. This semester, we have about 20 first-year classes that includes freshman comp, a freshman communication course, and then developmental. I've developed a... oh god, I can't even think of the word of it, a special freshman comp class. I guess it comes out of the co-requisite movement. I was opposed to the co-requisite movement originally, and over the last five years, I've seen it evolve and it's a complicated issue.

Most of our students are tested with a standardized test, acu-placing, and the acu-placer focuses a lot on the conventions of writing, grammar, et cetera, which many of our students are weak in, so they frequently get misplaced. A lot of my students in developmental don't need to be there, but their linguistic heritage is, and historical heritage is complex, and so sometimes in terms of rhetoric, they don't really take to European rhetorical approach. That's something I've been working on. Indigenous rhetoric is a thing that we've been talking about for a couple of years.

*SW: Alex, what guides your approach to teaching writing, or what are some pedagogical values or ideas that you want students to take from your writing classes?*

AT: I've taught in developmental for 30 years, and after 30 years, I'm just getting to the point where I think I'm beginning to figure things a little bit. I work with narrative primarily. I think narrative is extremely important. When we start teaching other rhetorical forms, they become really abstract and maybe almost culturally inappropriate for example, argument. Or if we call it a complaint or whatever, that carries negative connotations for perhaps people who aren't trained in rhetoric like we are. And so I do a lot about with storytelling. I have some notes here. Then I combine the Dene philosophy of learning into the course, and this is just a really rough philosophy and novel culture, and I can't pronounce the words real well, but they're four words, and basically they are think, plan, implement, and reflect. And so those forms sort of pedagogical.

It fits in real nicely with the writing process, not perfectly, but nicely. Then I take a lot of... in indigenous rhetoric, the values of knowledge are different, and so a lot more credence is given to personal experience, to spiritual growth, to psychological development and emotional development. So narrative works with those. Well, that's not to exclude all the other rhetorical

forms, but I'm dealing with first generation, first year writers, and so once I get them comfortable working in narratives, it's much easier to transition into the other more western abstract forms like argument, comparison, comparative analysis or whatever. Then I've also studied native writers, particularly Mamadé and Scott Mamadé. One of the most important things I've learned from Mamadé that I incorporate in my class, it's totally foreign to most Europeans, but the idea of grace. And grace is essentially a sense of gratitude. And so native ideologies of philosophies are very positive, but then the world we live in is very negative, and so you have all of these mixed signals.

I always tell my students to end their essay to view whatever knowledge they have as a gift and to be grateful for them, and they really are comfortable with that. Mamadé's a really good example. And then I developed a theory on my own. I call it Fry Bread Theory for narrative writing, and basically this happened in a class, was trying to figure out a way to teach my students the building blocks of narratives, and so I used the metaphor of fry bread, and so the different ingredients in fry bread correspond to the fundamental elements in narrative writing. For example, the Blue Bird flower correlates to event description and sequencing, the water correlates... The thing gets mixed up in my head. The water correlates perhaps to dialogue. The baking powder correlates to figurative language and the salt figures to figurative language if I haven't already said that.

I basically have four elements of makeup and narrative that correspond to the ingredients of fry bread. What really happened in this class that was so cool was one of the students said, "There's a fifth element, fifth ingredient." And I go, "What?" And he says, "Love." And then I said, "Yeah, man, you're exactly right." And love correlates to the thesis that infuses the bread. I don't know if you're familiar with fry bread or its history, but the love behind the bread is the source of everything, and so that really works with them. And so I use that. I work with elements primarily, and I work with the number four. In the Western tradition, I have four elements too. And after they get comfortable with the indigenous approach, then I begin showing them how I was taught. And the elements I talk about there are focus, development, unity... damn, can't think of the other one, focus, coherence. And so I talk about those and they correspond with the fry bread elements as well, but that's much further down the road if we get there.

*SW: What text in writing assignments do you use and how do your students respond to these texts in assignments?*

AT: I don't use a text, I use my own, whatever I have gathered. I use a lot of my own student writing too. If I get a student who really gets into an essay, they usually develop a great model and the students learn from that. I would say at least a third of my material is generated by students from previous classes. Then I do Mamadé, I do Simon Ortiz, I do Sherman Alexie, I do Alice Walker, Langston Hughes, Martin Luther King, and there are others, but mostly non-European writers. I'm trying to think of... I used to teach... I just quit teaching *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. I used that as a text in my developmental classes. I let the class determine that, and depending on how well the class jives, but I always... in developmental, I focus primarily on narrative, almost exclusively. I might do some compare and contrast, and then I might begin to... I don't believe in using MLA or APA style, so I teach students in-text citation, just writing it in. And so that's the direction I go into. And then probably the genre I rely on most is compare

contrast, or I call it comparative analysis. And then after that, I look at Native writers, and for example, I give them an essay by Winona LaDuke, and I say, "Write me an essay like she just wrote, but from your own cultural perspective." And they're usually really good at modeling. And so that's probably... I could do anything if I have the right models. I do what's called illiteracy... damn, I can't think of these. Illiteracy narrative. And so we look at Malcolm X, Learning to Read. We look at Frederick Douglass Learning to Read and Write, and then we look at Sherman Alexie, Superman and Me. And these are all three literacy narratives. And so what I asked them to do, I said, "Take a quote from this and write me out a paragraph of 150 words why you think this is interesting." And I've talked to them about literacy narrative and so on. And then I tell them with the first assignment, I say, "Place the quote at the beginning of the paragraph," and then for Malcolm X, I'll say, "Place your quote when you're developing your paragraph in the middle of the paragraph." And then when we get to Sherman Alexie, I say, "Take your quote from Sherman Alexie, break it up and distribute it throughout your paragraph." I give them very specific instructions. Now, 90% of them follow it, some of them don't, and I don't criticize them for it. And then I saw what we build an essay paragraph by paragraph. After they build that, then I tell them, "I want you to write a synthesis paragraph in which you take all three writers and you combine them in one paragraph, your discussion, and then you either end the essay with that, or you'll write a formal conclusion." And then at the very end, I have them write the introduction, but all along they know that they have to tie these things all together. And so that's what I do in my freshman comp class for their first essay.

And then after that, to me is, and I teach them taglines, how to introduce the quote, and I explain to them bibliographical information, things like that. And then sometimes we might generate a bibliography at the end of the essay, and I'll format it in MLA style. But I don't waste a lot of time on MLA and APA because I think it's waste of time for developing thinking skills.

*SW: Alex, what are some challenges to teaching writing at Navajo Technical University?*

AT: The challenges are with the students primarily, they live in a very rural environment. If we have any kind of precipitation, the roads are terrible, so they're under all kinds of psychological and emotional stress. And most people misread that as... for example, if someone comes in late regularly, I've had to deal with instructors being harsh and rude to the students. And the reason the students coming in late is because they've got four children and they have to wait for a babysitter or a family member, they have challenges like that. That's just the tip of the iceberg. Many of the families have all kinds of problems with substance abuse. Poverty is a huge problem. It's so rural that if they own a vehicle, it's a truck. And I drive 60 miles one way to get to school, so to get to any kind of job you have to drive. They have so many socioeconomic challenges, it's daunting. When I first started, I thought, "Oh no, this is crazy. I can't handle it." But then you just have to be patient and understanding with the students, so you have to... and that's probably the hardest thing for most people to understand, because we come from a different tradition. A lot of people don't really believe in historical trauma, but it's here. My challenges are my own stupidity and ignorance. Navajo people are gentle and kind, and so I've learned as much as I can from them.

*SW: What do you enjoy the most about teaching, writing in your institutional context?*

AT: Students will come up to you and thank you. That means a lot. I've read thousands upon thousands of stories that they've told from their lives. And then when I see my students succeed and graduate. And then every now and then there'll be a shout-out. And the Navajo Reservation is a beautiful place. I mean, it's got a lot of sadness and cruelty, but just a drive through Red Rock Canyons, over 8,000 foot passes and sea elk and wild horses and things like that. I guess, I never fit in anywhere. In 1973, I read *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* when I was 15, and it blew my mind, and I decided then I wanted to have something to do with native people. And then along the way, I got distracted from that. And then just, it seemed like magically I found myself here. It's like a home. I mean, even though I'm not a part and I never can be a part, it's close to a place of belonging.

Native people have an interesting concept. When I've learned this by reading *Winona Little Duke*, the land doesn't belong to us, we belong to the land. And so in a sense, I feel like I belong here in this place, and I've been made to feel that way by the Navajo people and the other tribes here who have been incredibly kind to me. I've just not worked with the Navajo. I've worked with some of the Pueblos and I worked in different contexts, the public school system, and then an organization called the National Indian Youth Leadership Project, which is like an Outward Bound version of a Native American version of Outward Bound for kids. I was a climbing bum for a long time, and when I got out of college, I said, "To hell with this world, it's stupid." I said, "I'm going to do what I want to do." And at the time, I loved to rock climbing, mountain climbing, ice climbing. And so for about 10 years, I did that. And then I got tired of being poor and went back and got my master's degree and then somehow wound up... without making any plan to be here, I wound up here.

*SW: Alex, this is my last question. What do you wish people knew or understood about Tribal Colleges and Universities?*

AT: Mostly about the students. They've got so much weight on them that literally, it's like they're carrying 50 pounds of psychological, physical weight compared to us. And they have been trained by history to accept failure. And so when they're being tested and they fail, it's not because they're not smart, it's because they've got this sort of... In Sherman Alexie, he talks about a man who committed suicide and that people can taste the defeat in the water. And so there's this... and it's not like they've given up or anything, but they expect their... I don't like to talk about it, but failure is embraced. And again, these come from Sherman Alexie's writing also. And so we've got to try to work with them by understanding them. And so the tribal colleges, that's a whole another entity. I was real lucky to work with some of the early people who worked in starting the colleges, tribal colleges, and sometimes we fear that they're trying too hard to be like other colleges or universities and that they've forgotten about the little people.

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