

Episode 128: Alexandra Gold

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Alexandra J. Gold talks about teaching at Harvard University, #MeToo, social media and digital activism, and her book on contemporary poetry and art.

Alexandra J. Gold is a head preceptor in the Harvard College writing program expose, where she has taught a course on women's narrative. Since 2018, she has received numerous certificates of teaching excellence, including extraordinary teaching and extraordinary times from the Harvard Office of Undergraduate Education. She earned her PhD in English Literature at Boston University and her BA in Political Science at English and MA in English at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include post-1945 American poetry and visual art, women's gender and sexuality studies, media and pop culture, and critical pedagogy. Her first book, *The Collaborative Artist's Book: Evolving Ideas and Contemporary Poetry and Art*, which considers poet painter collaborations and book form from mid-century to the present is forthcoming in 2023 from the University of Iowa Press, Contemporary North American Poetry Series. For more information on her teaching and writing, visit her website alexandriajgold.com or follow her on Twitter @agold258.

Alexandra, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: What's it like to teach writing at Harvard University? I'm also really interested in learning more about your position as a "head preceptor." What does that mean or involve?

AG: Sure, thanks so much for having me. I've been teaching at Harvard now for going into my fifth year at Harvard and I teach in the expository writing program or expos, as we call it at Harvard. It's really interesting to teach at Harvard in this position because expos is a really long-standing tradition. It's been around since I think 1872, so it's sort of a rite of passage for a lot of freshmen. I mean, literally you'll go to a wedding and be like, "Oh, I took expos back in the day." It has this real sense of history to it, which is a really unique thing that I've never encountered working in a department or program. I think the students also view it very much as a rite of passage. It's the only class that all students at Harvard absolutely have to take in their time. There is a real sense of tradition surrounding it, but also a little bit of intrigue because it's been passed down and the students are like, "Oh, I have to take an expos class. What's that going to entail?" Yeah, I think they view it with a little bit of trepidation, but also on my end, I see it as part of just this long, rich tradition in terms of being a preceptor.

Harvard's program is made up entirely of non-tenure track or what they call non-ladder faculty. Different non-ladder faculty within the institution have different roles. They have lectures which are capped at three years, and they have preceptors which are capped at eight years. Essentially, after eight years, your contract expires and there's not really a chance for renewal. Despite the fact that Harvard has this long, rich tradition of expos, it's a funny position to be in where you're limited to only having your eight years.

I think teaching at Harvard comes with a lot of benefits. There's a lot of privileges that come with it. It's a well-funded institution. At the same time, I think as a preceptor, I feel a little bit of the institution in some ways, but not in others because I know my time there is limited and I want to do the best I can in the time that I have. Yeah, I think it's a little bit of a funny position to be in, because I think as a teacher, I find myself growing year after year after year and just getting better at doing the thing that I'm doing while always being cognizant of the fact that it's a short lived situation. I guess I have a little bit of conflicting feelings towards it.

SW: Alexandra, what's your approach to teaching or what's your teaching philosophy and how does your institutional context inform what you do in the classroom? What assignments or text do students respond well to at Harvard University and why?

AG: That's a great question. One of the things that I've noticed at Harvard—and I taught writing at a couple of different institutions—is just the breadth of students that you get at Harvard because they are so generous with financial aid. You really have students who are coming from the most elite prep schools in the country, but you also have students who are coming from less prepared backgrounds and maybe haven't had that same kind of experience in high school and they're all in your class. It's a wonderful opportunity I think to really meet students where they're at. One of the things I really try and do in my classes is just say, "Okay, what skills are students coming in with? Do they know how to do the work of analysis? Do they know what a thesis is?" I think for most students, whether they've come from a slightly less prepared background or if they've come from this elite prep school, there's a lot of things that high school just doesn't prepare them for. Things like motivating your essay with stakes, I think despite having a wildly different array of students, there's always something new that they can discover together. I think you can really build a class community around those things, the things that they're mutually discovering and go from there.

We do have a sort of not standard set of assignments per se, but we're all doing similar work across classes. We always have a research paper at the end of the semester that the students have to do. Typically, most classes will do two to three essays, usually three. But if you do a capstone class, which I actually happen to teach, I do two essays and then I do a capstone. Each class is theme-based, so mine is on thinking about women's stories across different media. We do really try and teach a bunch of different media.

I start with literary short stories because that's sort of my wheelhouse. Then, we move into a little bit of feminist theory, which the students really seem to respond well to. Then, we delve into social media and think about social media activism. So, the course ends—and this has been so far my favorite assignment—with a capstone that asks students to translate their research papers into these group platforms where they're taking their research and making it available to a wider audience, asking them to think about what does it mean to communicate the same research through social media? How can social media be a form of communication and of activism and how do we speak to different audiences and genres? I think my favorite assignments that I've taught in a writing class are always the ones that ask students to think about audience and genre and they just tend to respond really well to that sort of thing.

SW: You teach a class on narrative, media, and #MeToo. Can you talk more about that course and how you invite students to participate in these larger social and cultural conversations?

AG: Yeah, it's been really, really rewarding. I started teaching this class in 2018, so right as #metoo is picking up steam and the students were very, very responsive to it. I always get students who want to take the class. It's never been under capacity because students are so eager to have these conversations in the classroom, especially given the #metoo landscape. What's been really interesting is seeing how that's evolved over the course of the five years. In the summer of 2020, of course we had Black Lives Matter and then there's been Stop Asian Hate, so there's been all these hashtags that have cropped up over the years that I've grown to embrace my classes.

We started off really heavy into #metoo, but the class is really interested in intersectional feminism. So, we think about what does it mean to talk about Stop Asian Hate or Black Lives Matter or all these things. I think, yeah, students are really receptive. I'm really cautious about giving them warning, like we are going to be talking about sexual abuse, sexual assault, things of that nature, racial violence. I try and make sure that everyone is as comfortable as possible with that because it can obviously be very triggering for some students. I tend to get a class filled with mostly women. I think on the one hand there are certainly students who have experienced these things who you have to navigate how to have those conversations with. On the other hand, there are women who haven't experienced that but feel very passionate about talking about it. They maybe have never had the space to really engage with it, especially at the first-year level. It can be a tricky subject to teach.

Obviously, you have to approach it delicately, but I think also it can be really rewarding, the conversations we've had around the class and social media, both what it's good for and also its pitfalls. Students bring a real balanced understanding of social media to the classroom where they're both digitally native and also at the same time skeptical of its limitations and what it can accomplish and what these sort of movements can do. So, it's led to some really rich conversations about both. Here's the sort of importance of these movements, especially for those whose voices or whose communication is marginalized in the mainstream. But also, there are limitations to what these platforms are able to accomplish, so we get to have great conversations about that.

SW: Can you talk more about digital activism? Are you asking students to participate within online activist communities or reflect on their own experiences within these communities? Are there social media assignments or analyses happening across social media platforms?

AG: Yeah, a little bit of all of that, honestly. Some of it is, I give them some readings. Just to frame our conversations in the past couple of years, especially once we pivoted to Zoom, I've actually found it pretty easy to bring in speakers. I'll have people who run these social media channels actually come to the class and talk to my classes about here's what it means to do this work, or we might look at some examples in class. I try and bring in sort of here's what these channels are doing. I think students are also, again, they're quite familiar with these things because they're on their devices all the time. They already come in with a baseline knowledge, And then, as I mentioned before, I ask them to produce their own social media. At the end of the

class, they do this social media channel and then they do a group presentation on it. And I ask them as part of that group presentation to reflect on a question related to social media and activism. Is this a better form for activism than traditional forms of media, visual art or literature, whatever. Or I'll ask them, is this a meaningful platform for allyship across racial gender divides?

I ask them to both create the channel and reflect on what they've created, because I think if you're going to assign a non-traditional assignment, that reflection piece or that metacognition piece is super important. Students both get to think about social media from a more, I don't know, theoretical perspective of here's what people have said about it, here's what people are doing with it, and then also from the more hands-on perspective. Okay, now we are content creators, what does that mean for us? How do we reflect on that role? Does this change our mind at all about?

I've had some students who have come in deep skeptics about social media. "Oh, we can never possibly reach other people, or it's meaningless or it's performative." Then, by the end when they make it, they're like, "You know what? This is kind of cool. Someone followed us online or we got some weird troll account." There's been one last semester, one group made a TikTok and one of their TikToks went viral and they were all excited about that. I think they get to really think through social media in a really meaningful way in the class, and that's a lot of fun to watch and to just encourage them.

SW: In your upcoming book, The Collaborative Artist's Book: Evolving Ideas in Contemporary Poetry and Art, you discuss the ways in which poets and artists work collaboratively. Tell us a bit more about the book and the importance of collaboration, contemporary poetry and art, and what this means specifically for writing teachers in the classroom.

AG: I come from a very traditional literary background. My PhD is in English. That's really where my writing tends to lie. Actually, there isn't a ton of crossover between my own teaching and the writing, except in the obvious ways that when you're actually doing the work of writing a book, you have some perspective on what your students are doing. My students make fun of me because I'm like, "I'm in it with you, I'm doing revision," and they're like, "Okay, we don't care." But yeah, my book is on the collaborations between experimental poets and artists in the mid-century. My focus in English is sort of post-'45 American poetry and visual art. Thinking through collaborations, it's really interesting to think about because the work of teaching is such a collaborative endeavor, and I've read so much about collaboration.

My dissertation was on collaboration, of course. I had the experience of, I saw my dissertation topic everywhere, so I was consumed with collaboration. Then, writing the book, the same thing. It's a bit funny to think about because in the classroom I feel like the work we do is so collaborative. These students create collaborative projects, we're having collaborative conversations, but the work of writing I'm asking them to do is often so solitary. The work of writing I'm doing is so solitary. Sometimes, I don't know, I feel like I don't quite know how to reconcile the work I'm doing in the classroom and thinking about all day long with the work I'm asking them to do.

I think at least researching collaboration and being so interested in that sort of thing in my own literary studies has really made me think about what does it mean to foster a collaborative classroom? What does it mean to make the work of writing feel more collaborative, when often we think of it as such a solitary endeavor? I think the work I've been doing in my book, while not directly applicable to what I'm teaching, has really influenced everything I'm doing in the classroom. Just thinking about how can we make writing seem a collaborative activity, whether that's peer review or group conferences or whatever it is. I think it's been really informative in that way and a nice way of bridging the two worlds, even though they're kind of concentric circles at this point where there's an overlap in the middle, but the book and the teaching sometimes feel like different endeavors.

I'm especially interested in thinking about questions of lyricism. The poetic lyric eye has been sort of a major interest of mine. I'm thinking about how these collaborative book forms that I'm studying sort of help us reconsider traditional ideas about lyricism and of thinking about the connections between the self and other and collaborators and how that shifts the paradigm of individuality and individual voice and all of this stuff. I think the other thing that I'm just really excited about is thinking about media connections. That's something I do a lot in my class as well. What does it mean that sort of the visual art of the experimental like 1950s and the literature or poetry is sort of moving in tandem? How are they shifting in relationship to each other?

...I would say that the two big things I'm thinking about in tandem in the book are both intermedial and intersubjectivity and how those two things coincide in this period. So, yeah, little teaser I guess for the book. Looking at these collaborative artist books, it's been a long-time project. I'm really excited to have it actually come into the world, and a little nervous too. Just like my students, I'm nervous to put my writing out for other people to read.

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