

## **Episode 155: Anita Roastingear**

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 sixth episode in a 10-week series that highlights tribal colleges and universities.

In this episode, Anita Roastingear talks about teaching at Navajo Technical University, how her own experiences as a student at a tribal college and informs her approach to teaching, taking a Diné philosophy to assessment, and what she wished people knew about Tribal Colleges and Universities.

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Elizabeth Anita Roastingear is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and a descendant of the United Kittawa Bands of Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma. She's an Associate Professor of English and the Arts and Humanities Department at Navajo Technical University. She graduated from the Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico in May 2016 with a master of fine arts and creative nonfiction writing. She resides in Crownpoint, New Mexico with her two dogs, Dora and Pony.

Anita, thanks so much for joining us.

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

AR: Most of our students here are Diné, which is the Navajo people word for themselves. And most of them are from the reservation. However, we have pretty much people from all over the world that are here either as students or faculty and staff. An interesting makeup to have so many different races here. Well, we have all races represented here, that I can tell. And let's see. We have a total of five instructional sites. There's Chinle, Arizona. There is Teec Nos Pos, Arizona. There's Bond Wilson up in Fruitland, New Mexico. And there's Crownpoint. And then we work with the Zuni people out at Zuni Pueblo.

First year writing classes, I just went by our current schedule and it looks like there's three of them on there. And we have like five teachers that are teaching the writing classes.

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

AR: Reading and writing were like childhood friends who are always with me as I was growing up in Northeastern Oklahoma. And telling stories in the classroom always gets the creative energy flowing, and letting students know I used to be a TCU student too, and I know what it's like to cram for tests and write papers. And they tend to open up and do the best they can after we share our stories of struggles and triumph. And the one thing that guides me is that I try to teach my students that learning is not stagnant. It's a fluid entity and it never ceases, and more will always be revealed. That's pretty much guides me in my personal life and in my professional life. And it's been a pretty good guide so far. I've been doing the teaching since 1999, started off as a teaching assistant at Northern Arizona University, and then worked as a 9th and 10th grade English teacher at Gray Hills Academy in Tuba City, Arizona, which was mostly, it was also on the Navajo reservation. And worked as a writing tutor for adult education in Flagstaff. And so I've just been doing this in one form or another of helping students write, and revise, and write some more.

*SW: How has your own experiences as a student at a TCU informed your teaching?*

AR: I think it's unique, that I have a unique insight because I'm a graduate of II in Santa Fe. And so I went there as a TCU faculty member on a Mellon Masters Fellowship back in... I started in the summer of 2014 and got out in 2016. And it's all an inside job. It feels like I just have that insight. And plus my son, he's a citizen of the Navajo Nation too. It's part of the k'é, which is the family oriented philosophy that's part of our core values. And once the students find out that I'm a Cherokee, they say, "What are you doing way out here?". And then I tell them my Grapes of Wrath story, the indigenous version. So it's very unique. And I think that I was paid a really high compliment by one of my Navajo coworkers, and I didn't realize that she thought of me in that way as being that unique person with a lot to offer the student.

*SW: Anita, what text and writing assignments do you use, and how do students respond to those?*

AR: Let's see. This semester I have three sections of humanities, which is called the History of American Indians in Media. And we're using Tommy Orange's book *There There*. And we're also using Ramona Emerson's book *Shutter*. And then also I have a classroom library that the students can check books out as well. And for my creative nonfiction classes I'm using Anne

Lamott's book *Bird by Bird, Instructions on Writing and Life*. And it's hard to read how students are responding to it other than, "Oh, I got to read this book. Oh, I got to write a tribal college journal style media review for this book." So we bring in the tribal college journal too as part of our readings because every fall volume has the winners from the Tribal College Journal Writing Contest. And there are Navajo technical students in that edition too, as well as on the website for the Honorable Mentions.

So as far as the family oriented is that out here, they introduce themselves by their clans. And often I hear after someone introduces themselves, I've overheard other people say, "Oh, he's my father, clan father," or, "She's my grandma, she is my sister, she's my brother." And the clan system is very extended to where everyone is a family member. And that tends to boil over into the classroom too because when we do introductions, people introduce themselves by their clans out here too. There's earthlings from every continent that have come together here. And as far as the Diné philosophy of education, we think it, plan it, we implement it, and then we reflect on it. So it sounds simple, but it's not easy. It's something that's been with the Diné Nation since time began for them. And we implement it into our writing structures, the way that we assess student learning, like a boat, the rudder, the thing that guides us.

*SW: What does it look like to take a Diné philosophy of education to assessment?*

AR: Well, one of the goals for this semester, fall semester 2023 is to effectively communicate in a changing environment. So we have these goals that we pull, that with the help of the general education people, the Student Learning Outcome committee. And it has to be teamwork. It really has to be teamwork to get the assessment on track. And what we do, we come back two weeks before the students do, and we all meet and we get together, and we discuss these new goals for each semester. And we have people that basically have reworked the student learning outcomes more closely related to the Diné philosophy of education. And what's interesting is that no matter where you're from, if you're from California and you're bilagáana, or if you're from Niger and you're African American, or you're Cherokee from Oklahoma, we all come together and rally around that, the philosophy of our institution, which is based on those principles, Diné principles.

*SW: What are some challenges to teaching writing at Navajo Technical University?*

AR: I'm kind of freaked out about artificial intelligence and wondering how am I going to spot that? Our institution didn't even have the software that could spot plagiarism. I think it was called Turn It In. But somehow I just have, just from reading everybody's writing, and then something comes in from a student and it's like, "This does not sound like you. What's happening here?". I don't immediately jump to conclusions, but my way to do it before artificial intelligence was to copy a piece of the writing and stick it in Google and see what comes up. And it's like, oh man, this is not the writing, or yeah, this is them, nothing's popping up.

And then also another challenge, I guess it's kind of the technological challenges for me because I've set up my humanities class as an online class that's asynchronous. And we're using Blackboard Ultra. And so that kind of was a challenge because I'd just been putting it off and just doing my face-to-face classes, and not doing, oh, I don't want to do that. I don't want to do that. But then I had a student from Zuni that requested it, so just one student got me really motivated

and then I like it. I'm thinking I'm going to put all of these on there, but I haven't done that yet. So I still have four face-to-face classes and one online class.

Another challenge would be getting my students to revise their work. That's been a challenge over the semester. They just want to keep turning in the same things again. And so it's a challenge. And different ways, maybe make it more enticing, or more fun or. So I'm still working with that, coming up with ways to put the ball in their court for revision.

And then also the students and our faculty are challenged by housing, the housing on campus. We do have a man and women's dorm, and some family units, and we have childcare here. There's two actually, a childcare that's run by the school, and then the childcare that's run by the nation, and they're both located on campus. People that don't have housing have to drive for miles and miles to get here because Crownpoint is situated about 55, 56 miles to Gallo, one way, and then to another town called Grants about the same distance one way. So you're looking at a hundred miles a day if you live in Gallo, to come to classes here. And then also if you live up north in the town of Farmington and you want to come to school here, and there's no room in the dorm or you can't afford it, the school does have a van service. And at one time, the Navajo Nation did have bus service that would come here. So those are the challenges for the students. Also in our department, we started buying nutritious snacks to hand out in class, so they're not hungry.

*SW: Anita, what do you enjoy the most about teaching writing at Navajo Technical University?*

AR: Helping my students get published, that has always just been so enjoyable and so satisfying for me. And our main supporter in that is a Tribal College Journal. They get their stories published there. I've had students that have been published in books that come out of the Tribal College Journal Press. And recently one of those students, he came back to school and he enrolled in our bachelor's in Fine Arts in Creative Writing program. And he was doing other things, but he wrote a story called Flaming Chicken, and it was about his uncle's '79 Trans Am. And it got published in the Tribal College Journal book called Touching Home. And so now he's back. And I'm really glad that he joined back up with us. And so that's one of the things that I do enjoy the most is helping them get published. Because whenever I was a young kid, I wasn't even out of high school, I had a teacher, an English teacher, that helped me publish a book of poems. And now it's in the Cherokee National Research Center in their archives. And I got to see it this past summer while I was there in Tahlequah, and I just realized, it's like I'm that teacher.

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

AR: The thing that I would like to see is that I know there's a lot of native scholars that are at hugely endowed institutions across the country and the world. And I would like for them to do a tour of duty at a tribal college. I'd like for them to come. And a tribal college that is near where their tribal nations are located. Because I know of one tribal scholar, whenever I asked her if she would consider coming to NTU to teach some classes, she said the money's not good enough. And so just put the money aside and come. Just do it for a year, sign a contract for a year and give back to the Navajo Nation. And even if you served as an adjunct, even if you did adjunct

one class online, that's what I'd like for people to want to do that, and want to come back and help these students.

And I guess I ended up doing that myself. I started off as, my first college classes were taken whenever I was a private at Fort Carson, Colorado. I took two classes in the basement of the old Fort. And then next stop was Diné College in Saly, Arizona, is where I did a full freshman year of college. I think the tribal college movement is so important. And also, we belong to the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, and whenever the Supreme Court struck down affirmative action, our consortium was quick to let everybody know that this does not affect the tribal college movement, we will continue and everyone is welcome here.

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