

Episode 16: Anna Hensley and Brian Bailie

Transcript

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

Before we get started, I wanted to spend a little time reflecting on how I feel this podcast is reaching its aim so far in creating spaces for teachers to talk about writing across different institutional contexts and positions. Pedagogue, so far, has made an attempt to build this huge table so-to-speak for all of us to sit down and listen to each other. We've had conversations with graduate students, assistant professors, associate professors, full professors, emeriti, distinguished scholars, emerging scholars. We've talked with teachers at community colleges, private universities, four-year universities, research universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, and now regional or branch campuses. And geographically, from the West coast to the East coast of the United States. From North to South.

When this thing started in May 2019, that was the goal: "to promote diverse voices at various institutions and help foster community and collaboration among teachers of writing." We're still working on that. Thank you for being a part of it.

In this episode, I talk with Anna Hensley and Brian Bailie, Assistant Professors of English at The University of Cincinnati, Blue Ash College, a two-year regional campus, where they teach first-year and intermediate composition courses. In this episode, we talk about what it's like teaching at a regional or branch campus, Anna and Brian talk about their experiences in the classroom, and how their graduate school experience didn't quite train them for their current positions.

Anna and Brian, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Let's start by talking about UC Blue Ash College, a branch campus of the University of Cincinnati. What's it like teaching at a regional campus?

AH: I think one of the things that can be confusing for people is that because we're a branch campus, people aren't really sure what the relationship between our campus and main campus is, and it really is, in our context, things run separately, a lot of things are done separately and we have a very distinctive campus culture. There's an intimacy. With 5,000 students, you can walk around campus, which I do almost every day, and you regularly see your students that you've had in the past, you have now. They stop and talk to you, you get a chance to know faculty in other departments pretty well, really fast. So, there's this, I think, a strong collective campus identity, especially around involvement in AUP, in the mission driven nature of the campus, that student oriented work that I feel is really deep. It's not just a, "we care about our students." I think people really genuinely care about their students and it's shared cross department, college wide mission that I think drives what everybody does, which just gives the place a very distinct energy.

BB: Absolutely, and one of the big things that I don't think a lot of people realize is that UC, Miami, Ohio State all have branch campuses, also referred to as regional campuses. All this comes out of that history of Lyndon Johnson and the war on poverty. So, when that money got to Ohio, at Ohio, the state legislature said is, "Instead of creating new schools, what we'll do is we'll

give it to flagship schools or big state schools that are already funded, public land grant schools, and we'll say you need to start regional campuses that have distinct degrees and offer distinct very different things than what you're doing at your main campus." So that way they're taking education as deep as they could. What people don't also understand is geographically, this is Southwest Ohio. So we're basically what's called the Tri-state area and this is essentially an extension of Appalachia.

So people that we knew in grad school and I've had other friends as well talk about their family at one time lived in Ohio because they're from the South, and they even specifically live in the Cincinnati area because this is where the family moved for work when they were coming North. Then they moved out from there. They went further North, they went West. It's an interesting place, and it is also interesting in the fact that because of that, like Anna was saying, there are a lot of people who are really invested in the concept of this regional campus and of it doing its work, which is to provide education and services, democratize education essentially. Because we are way more affordable than the main campus and at the same time, everything transfers over so it's all one UC. So that's the selling point more than anything is that you get an associate's, it's from the University of Cincinnati, but you did your coursework at Blue Ash College. Then, if you want to have everything transfers over seamlessly and you can continue on to a bachelor's.

SW: What are you teaching and what types of materials or assignments are you bringing into the writing classroom?

AH: I think Brian and I teach the same classes. We teach our first year English class, such as English 1001, and then we have a second part of our comp sequence. It's supposed to be a second semester sophomore class, which is intermediate composition. So we both teach those two classes and we are on a 4/4 teaching load with optional summer teaching, which I think we both do.

BB: Which isn't optional for us.

AH: Optional, in scare quotes.

BB: We got babies to feed.

AH: Yeah, no kidding. Depending on how much your children like to eat or if you enjoy house repairs. So what I do in both of my classes, I feel my teaching style has evolved a lot since I've been here where I've developed this, I don't know, it's just this very experimental style where I just throw things in half tested, just to get feedback from the students. Because I feel our students are very, I think, vocal in giving feedback about what they think is good, what is interesting to them, and what is not interesting to them at all or what they take umbrage with. I can't necessarily predict those things either, and so a lot of it has been collaboratively developed with them. Like, do you like this? Does it work?

So, a lot of the texts that I bring into the class are really, the ones that I hold on to, are ones that they really respond to or that they really like, that resonate with them in some way. I've done that with assignments too, where I go in with a certain set of objectives that I want an assignment to

have, but how that actually manifests depends a lot on figuring out what really engages them. So, in my first year writing class, our first assignment, we do a unit that's all about education, but it's really about engaging them to talk about what their educational experience has been like. Getting them to theorize why do you think it was that way? Why do you think things worked out that way? To write about that, to reflect on it, to bring their own experience into conversation with research that they're doing. That is a very different assignment than the synthesis driven, first unit writing assignment that I would have used at the beginning. But getting them to think about really what they're expert in and how that crafted their own goals.

BB: I have changed a lot. I've kept my content the same for the most part. I don't really change readings, but I constantly play with the assignments based on a lot like what Anna was talking about, which is how are the students reacting to it? Because I elicit feedback from them, I ask how they're doing with it, what do they think about it? I'll make time for that in classes or after classes, but the big thing that I've moved and shifted to is I've totally moved into this idea that I hate grading. So, I've gone to contract grading, and basically it's a hybrid contract. It leans heavily on this labor concept. If you do these things, here's what you're going to get.

So it's more of a hybrid contract like you'd see with what Peter Elbow wrote about years ago. So, if you do this work, yes, you get a B, and then anything beyond the B for the class is based on my expertise as a compositionist. That's what I've moved to, and at the same time I've also moved to being very transparent about this idea of writing because so many of the students come in and they're like, "I really don't like writing. I didn't do well with writing." They've had such bad experiences with placement tests that I am really open about the idea of talking about writing as living in an ecology, in an ecosystem.

Because I've done so much editing, I talk about even academic writers, but especially other writers in this profession that get paid in the "open market," they have other readers reading their writing and you have to be okay with that. But you also have to understand, too, that you just need to write, and it's just a draft, and you're going to get feedback, and we'll talk about the ways to be constructive and genuine and generative and polite, but you just need to write and get away from this concept of we're going to do this perfect thing that we call this essay.

I've moved to essentially using a blog all the time, and so they use WordPress and we blog and I have these heuristics I've got set up for the different readings that we're doing. The heuristics are often geared towards the smaller skills that I want them to be able to use when they get to that final assignment for that particular unit. It's the idea that we're constantly exchanging, going back and forth and talking about what we're doing in writing and how we're doing it, and then really just trying to stress you have the right to your own language.

Writing as a way to start thinking about stuff, writing as a way to reflect, looking back at that writing, reflect on that writing, and then coming to a position on an issue that concerns you. That's what I've really started stressing, whereas when I first came here, it was very much seminar papers, college essay, let's do this stuff, let's know the ins and outs of university discourse, you need to understand that. Now that I understand really the student demographic, it's like, no, what can we do? How can you use writing as critical literacy tools, as a tool set?

SW: Now, you both graduated from Syracuse University, a private research university, which I imagine is really quite different than your current institutional context. How did your graduate school experience train you for teaching at a two-year college?

AH: You have this lovely note right here.

BB: I have this lovely note [sarcasm]. My lovely note is it didn't, and that's not necessarily completely truthful. It did prepare me in the sense that it let me feel comfortable in the classroom. It got me teaching to the point where I could talk about those controversial, topics because the topics in my courses that I use, I tend to let students, they can pick what they want. We're building towards skill sets so at the end they're writing what they want to write about it. But in particular with the intermediate comp class I teach, I deal with the Plessy versus Ferguson case, and I've stuck with this the entire time I've been here. My time at Syracuse got me ready for that, how to discuss things in really touchy, odd subjects because we go into segregation and we talk about race and the construction of whiteness.

For that, yeah, I'm grateful for Syracuse. It's a composition and cultural rhetoric program, that's what I was able to get from it. But in the idea that we're going to be working in a situation that is a 4/4 teaching scenario with usually two summer classes, the idea that we'd be dealing with a diverse student population, the idea that we would have to even navigate things like service work, committee work, being ready for those things, while they were there, that was an option, it was always an option that you had to sign up for and it was awarded to people essentially, if I remember correctly. It didn't really get me ready for that and make me well rounded, as well as the stuff that I do even outside of the campus in trying to work with writing groups that are off campus. It would've been really great to know how to write a grant.

It would've been great to have that practice for writing grants. Instead of elevator pitches for me getting a job, it would've been great to have elevator pitches to figure out how to get funding when you're talking to upper level administration to get them to buy off, especially when you're at a campus where that's not considered normal, that you're not doing that work, that you're not looking for that type of funding. So in a way it didn't get me ready for the majority of what I deal with every day. How about you?

AH: Yeah, I feel like I got some good teacher mentoring from the program that was helpful, that helped me start to develop the reflective teaching practice that I really need here. But a lot of the good teaching experience that I had too, I did do some stuff that allowed me to work with under prepared students, but that was optional summer teaching that, again, was outside of the balance of the regular program that I sought out because I had that inclination. Or I also was a TA in the Women's and Gender Studies department at Syracuse for two years and that was also really useful experience, but again, was a thing that I did outside of what would have been the core training program. But yeah, no, I don't feel like I was prepared for what is the bulk or all of my day to day work.

Especially not the challenge of being in a classroom. When we say a diverse classroom, it's not aesthetic. It's not just that the students don't look like each other. You're talking about having students who could succeed and be in the top of their class at any selective admissions university

sitting next to students who are struggling to be here and complete reading assignments and that are just not well prepared. Students who have very different backgrounds and very different relationships to different kinds of academic genres and very different relationships to higher education in general, very different goals, with some really tough demands on their lives that are also really hard to help them navigate as a teacher. So, that part of it is what is really, I think, challenging and that I was not prepared for at all.

So really made me revolutionize even the approach to teaching that I had when I came in, because so much of what I had learned about teaching did not apply in this context. It would be unethical to do some of the things that I had done in a different institution that worked perfectly well there and that made sense there but did not make sense here. So, it's forced me to develop a different flexibility and a different level of transparency with my students too, about what I'm doing and how I'm developing things and what's being required of them.

BB: But some of those demands that we're talking about are students who are working 40 hours, 50 hours a week outside of school, students who are already parents, whether young or not. Maybe they're returning students. A lot of them are also returning vets, they're coming back from active engagement overseas.

AH: They may not be parents, but a lot of our students, they still have very real family demands. Like, they're caring for siblings and they're caring for parents and grandparents and they're working not for jeans, but to help their families pay rent. Living in a lot of very precarious situations too.

BB: Absolutely.

AH: That disrupt regularly their ability to get through the classes.

SW: What advice or what might you suggest for grad students at institutions like Syracuse do to be more prepared to teach at institutions like UC Blue Ash College?

BB: That's a good one. I think one of the ways I've been resilient and been able to not lose my complete cool is, before this, I actually ... Before I went back to grad school. I'm older, so complete disclosure, I'm 45. So I went back to grad school much later in life. I had been a special ed teacher before this, and so it wasn't necessarily I was unprepared for it and I knew that. I knew that even when I was at Syracuse. It's like, well, yeah, this is great, but this isn't real. This is rarefied. But I think that in working and being exposed to people like Steve Parks who's doing work out in the communities, especially at big schools you need to get off campus and you need to go work out in the community.

Even though I wasn't always out there with them, being just associated with him, working with him on projects, not necessarily on the ground, but dealing with it, reading through things, helping him put things together on the backstage side of it really helped that sense, and understanding that there is an entire world off campus you have to be aware of. So getting off campus is good. I think working pretty extensively in the writing centers help as well, because then you're actually dealing with oftentimes, and it's unfortunate, but you still have students and

even professors who've seen the writing center as a place of remediation, and so you'll deal with the students who are at different levels of preparedness, who might struggle with particular academic literacies, or might just be not really ready to student.

That idea, like our college here uses studenting, how to be a student. So I was also ready with that because, even in my masters program at Cal State San Bernardino, I worked in the writing center. So, those are the sorts of things I think that are probably close that are things that are actually doable, like a small tactic. Maybe even just knowing that it's not the reality. I never took a grad class actually had me read Marc Bousquet's *How the University Works*. Everybody talked about it, but no one actually taught it in a class. It wasn't till after I got out and I just started reviewing it recently and I'm like, this is so true. Why aren't people talking about this more? I think even if you want to stick to that seminar model, reading texts like that that are much more direct and critical of the "job market" and of the sorts of things that we do to get grad students ready for the job market and how that system isn't broken.

It's not failing. It's not some weird dip that's going to recover from. No, this is a system that's designed to create this systemic set of practices that always make you feel like it's your fault. That gets you ready for the fact, or even should get you ready for the fact, that the PhD is actually, as Bousquet says, that actually usually signals the end of a teaching career, end of a career in academia for a lot of people who go to grad school.

AH: The big shift for me has been a shift in identity, I guess, in terms of how I see myself and my own goals. I always knew when I was in grad school that I wanted a teaching intensive job, and that my primary identity really was as a teacher. I was also very aware that that is not ... I felt strongly that that was not how I was supposed to feel or that's how I supposed to identify. So, I think it's worth just being aware of the identity that you're being often disciplined into. You're being shaped into a particular person, and thinking about, so is this what I want? If it isn't, and I can see the contours of that, what else do I need to do to be positioning myself in meeting my goals?

Because you do get a lot of guidance that can be really helpful if that's the path that you want to be on. Our program have really intensive job market preparation, which I didn't participate in because I am naturally rebellious, but also because I thought I don't want to do any of that. Indeed, a lot of the things that they wanted us to do were things I didn't have to do to get this job. I was being trained to build up a research profile and being trained to start thinking about composition beyond first year composition. I wasn't super interested in doing that and that's not what my life looks like now. Now my life looks like a lot of first year composition, which I actually find really enriching and really creatively stimulating. Now I'm in the process of also realigning my research identity to match what my reality looks like.

But I just think that identity portion is important because if you're thinking ... It's so easy as a grad student to think all right, so I'm trying to build up this research profile so who are the people that I'm looking towards as researchers. Just forget, well, but then, who also are mentors in terms of teaching or professional identity who are working in the kinds of places that I think that I would like to work at. How can I find out what that day to day reality looks like?

SW: How do you manage your 4/4 teaching load with your service and research obligations?

AH: I think it's a really hard balance. I think I have a tendency when people say something like, "Oh, a 4/4 load," or, "The grading must be crushing," to be, "No, it's not that bad. You don't know my life." But it is a lot of work. It is super difficult to get stuff done during the semester. It's hard when you are teaching two classes over the summer in a six week period to capitalize on your summer really and get a break so that you can keep moving forward. I think for me, the service part hasn't been terribly difficult, because the service stuff I've been able to pick up just seems like an extension of what I do in the classroom anyway, and it's all, again, organized around maintaining our college, and so it feels part of that mission that I'm already committed to anyway.

Research has been a lot harder for me. To make the switch to teaching oriented research is big because that's not what I was trained to do, so it's not just about drawing on a separate set of skills. I'm in this process of retraining myself, it feels like, so that I can make that pivot, which has been hard. Not just because it's time intensive but because then also I have research demands that I have to keep up with to keep my job, so I'm trying to keep along with my workload while also making this big pivot. That's been really tough.

BB: Again, I'm in the same boat as Anna. I've been able to pick up some service that matches a lot of what we already do and the sorts of reasons why I applied here or why I actively sought this out, even though I went to a school that did not necessarily promote going to teach at a two year college. I do a lot of union work because I come from a union family and this campus is amazingly strong in the overall collective bargaining unit. Our campus is 85% membership. 85% of the entire campus is part of the union and not free riding, whereas at Clifton, which is the main campus that people think is the University of Cincinnati, has 50 to 51% active membership, paid membership.

I participate in that and again, it's because I do really feel, and especially since I've been revisiting Bousquet, a lot of what he talks about is gospel truth, how the system's set up, how it's being run in particular ways, and it's only through something like collective bargaining you're able to even have a stand and to stop this constant march towards this completely neo-liberal education where everything is flows of capital and entertainment for people who are on campus.

The other thing I do is, we both balance things like placement reading. At times we'll have close to a hundred placement exams to read through, and then with my professional work, and I was an editor on *Reflections* for a long time, so I'm really big into community literacy, community publishing. To me, that goes back out as an extension of what we do here because I'm trying to use writing as a democratizing force. So the work that I do off campus that I also turn into my professional, here I'm doing this presentation on here's what we're doing together, me and this writing group, it's an extension of that because I even bring some of those concepts back into the classes I teach.

SW: Anna and Brian, thank you again for joining us and thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.