

Episode 141: Anthony Lince

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Anthony Lince talks about Writing about Writing (WAW), teaching at two-year colleges, and student perceptions on labor-based grading.

Anthony Lince is a Latinx educator and scholar. As a lecturer at UC San Diego and local community colleges, he teaches first-year composition courses. His current work is focused on Writing about Writing, writing-related transfer and equitable assessment practices, specifically labor-based grading. His writing has been published in journals such as California English and WPA Writing Program Administration. He also has a forthcoming chapter to be released in Effective Alternative Assessment Practices in Higher Education.

Anthony, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You teach in a few different contexts, from working at UC San Diego to local community colleges in the area. Can you talk to me more about your approach to teaching writing and how that approach shifts depending upon your institutional context?

AL: Yeah. Well, first I just want to say thank you, Shane, for having me on the podcast. I'm a huge, huge fan and really love the work that you do, and congratulations on your book, Shane. I think, like I said, the work you're doing is so amazing and I'm looking forward to continue reading. So, thank you. Yeah, getting to that question, one thing that I really love about our profession is that we can continually challenge ourselves to grow, or maybe we are challenged to grow and change our teaching practices. But when I first started teaching as a TA and as a lecturer, I used a themed approach within first year composition, and that's where you have a sort of just general topic and all the activities, readings and writings revolve around that topic, and that was a lot of fun. But as of late, this approach has really been changing for me, and I think a big part of it comes from feeling this tension between that course theme and discussions around writing and I never felt like I could really make those two things gel or work well together. I felt like one always took over the other, and more often than not, it was the theme taking over instead of the writing.

And a lot of these questions led me to Wardle and Downs' work, especially on Writing about Writing, their article, Writing Misconceptions and Wardle's Mutt Genres especially were instructive for me. And a lot of what I read from those articles from them and others made a lot of sense to me, it kind of just clicked. Oh, instead of thinking about a theme within first year comp, the whole course will be focused on writing on these questions around identity, around genre, around discourse communities, and getting students to see that writing is not only something that we do, but also something that we study. And so that's been a lot of fun. I'm about six to seven weeks into a Writing about Writing course this semester and primarily doing it right now at a Grossmont Community College, and the full Writing about Writing approach, seeing the way that students are reacting to having these conversations.

One of the things that I'm consistently hearing is, "Oh, I wish I would've known this sooner, like in high school or middle school." It's been really fun having those conversations with students. And like I said, for me, this is just making sense right now. And I don't want to suggest that this is the one right way to teach first year comp, or that if you use themed courses that's necessarily wrong. But for me, specifically, this has been really helpful in my teaching practices. Elizabeth Wardle was really helpful in getting me to think through these ideas. She was real generous with her time. I got to have a conversation with her over Zoom and talk about these ideas that I've been thinking about. And so, yeah, looking forward to continue this.

To get to your second part of the question, how might my approach shift depending on the location that I teach at? This is something I've been thinking a lot about as of late. At one of my teaching contexts, I can fully enact a Writing about Writing course, but at another one I have to fit it in within this themed approach. And this has been really interesting to me. I eventually want to get into WP work down the line, and I've been really curious to think about these questions around how a writing program can meet its own outcomes and goals and values, while also balancing autonomy for instructors. And so, I can definitely see the benefit to both approaches, maybe full autonomy in one and shared curriculum in the other, or a mixture of those two approaches somewhere down the line. But moving forward, I really want to, I'm interested to talk to more WPAs and see what are their thoughts and challenges around this sort of work and around these questions.

SW: Anthony, I would love to hear you talk more about how your students are responding to this Writing about Writing (WAW) curriculum at Grossmont Community College.

AL: Yeah, yeah, definitely. I think that's a really great question. One of the big things that I'm noticing is that students are, especially because we have such big conversations around genre to begin the class, that students are really taking up this approach with genre or these ideas around genre and not only thinking about genre within novels, like you have mystery or action or whatever else it might be, but they're thinking about the writing that they're doing with text messages, with social media posts, with GoFundMe pages or whatever else it might be as genres. And I really love that because it helps students see that they're writing for specific audiences in those cases, that they have a certain context, that they have various purposes that they're trying to achieve. And getting them to see that they're already doing that work of writing within various genres, allows them to see writing within various academic disciplines as sort of similar. It's like, "Oh, well, I need to learn how to do these things. I'm not a bad writer because I don't know how to do them, I need to learn this specific genre or the specific values of the discipline," and so on and so forth. So that's been really, really great. Every time a student mentions genre, I just get a little smile on face. I'm like, "Oh, cool. Cool."

SW: You have also worked closely with Southwestern College, a public two-year college in Chula Vista, California. Do you mind talking about your experiences at Southwestern College and how that has shaped your approach to teaching? Maybe you could talk about how these different institutional contexts inform your vision or your future vision for writing program administration.

AL: Yeah, definitely. My time at Southwestern College was really informative for me in terms of just becoming an instructor in my own classroom. I did work as a writing center tutor for quite a while, but I also worked as a writing center or writing embedded tutor in classrooms. And so, I got to see lots and lots of different professors in the classroom teaching in multiple ways. And that, for me, was just transformative because I got to see the things that I thought, "Oh, I could definitely try that out." And some things that maybe wouldn't work so well for me, and not even in a negative way, but just in the sense that, "Oh, that wouldn't work with my personality or with my teaching ideals or beliefs," or whatever else it might be.

And so, when I got to the classroom as a TA for the first time, I felt like I was almost weirdly ready and prepared. And I know that kind of goes against a lot of what people say, but I did. I feel like that experience early on at Southwestern really shaped me and helped transform what I do in the classroom. So, I'm really thankful for that work. As a tutor, one of my favorite things to do now as an instructor is just sitting down with a student in conferencing and working one-on-one with them to really help them develop their ideas and getting them to see that their thoughts have value, that they can contribute something to a conversation. So, that work is really meaningful.

SW: Anthony, was there an aha-moment in this educational background that you felt like rhetoric and composition in the teaching of writing was the direction you wanted to take?

AL: Yeah, I think for sure it definitely happened in the community college setting. That's sort of where it started for me, where a professor recommended me for... I was going down a different career path at the time, but recommended me for tutoring. He is like, "Hey, you're pretty good at this writing stuff." And so that really took me down the path of, even though I didn't have a language for it, I thought it was literature at the time that I was looking to get into, but it was actually a Writcon and writing and these questions around community with writing and genre and all these ideas. And so, that was a really big impactful moment for me because I didn't have a good experience in high school with writing at all. I was actually always really scared to write. And even going into college, I was terrified to put my voice out there and really communicate my ideas. And so, for the professor to say, that was impactful for me. And so, wanting students to see that they have meaningful things to say can really make positive impact with their writing has been just one of the driving forces for me.

I'll share one student example that I had recently that I thought was pretty great. The student talked about how he felt like he wasn't a good writer, and yet he talked about writing these social media posts where he reached a large audience writing these poems that really touched a lot of people. And I was like, "Wow, how do you not think of yourself as a good writer? I think you're a fantastic writer." And really what he was pointing to was not being a good writer in academic context, but even that was something that would be pushed back on, or I hope to have helped them push back on. And we can really explore those ideas within that Writing about Writing course. And so getting to know, see that you have a lot to say in different situations too.

That was one of the things. And I really just love the writing community. On Twitter, everyone's been so great in terms of sharing their ideas or their resources or lending a helping hand whenever I have a question. And like I mentioned earlier, with Elizabeth Wardle, just being able

to talk to her, or even before that, like with Asao Inoue, just having conversations with him. And I know there's a lot of issues with any work, but I'm really thankful to be part of a community that is just so generous, and so I couldn't think of a better community to be a part of.

SW: You recently graduated with your MA in English with an emphasis in Rhetoric and Writing Studies at San Diego State University. The title of your thesis is Student Perceptions of Labor-Based Grading and First Year Writing Courses. I would love to hear more about this research study and what you learned about labor-based grading.

AL: Yeah, just to provide a little bit of context for this question or why I chose to do this study. I was coming from teaching at the high school level where a lot of my conversations with students were focused on grades instead of writing. And so, that kind of led me to Peter Elbow's work on contract grading and then Mike Rose and his ideas on identity in grades and how they're negatively impacted. And then more recently, Asao Inoue's work on labor-based grading. And so, I went into my first class as a TA wanting to not grade or do something differently, something with more compassion, and that was a little bit more equitable. And so, I did labor-based grading for two semesters as a TA. And after that, I was really loving my experience so much that I wanted to just join the conversation that others were having, and also to get a sense of what my students were thinking about this assessment method.

I had asked them in the class, and generally it was favorable, but I wanted to do some of that work through this project as well. And I was noticing, at the time, there wasn't a whole lot of student input within the scholarship on labor-based grading. And so, I wanted to contribute a little bit of that. There's been more now, but this is one way that I felt like, "Oh, I can do a teacher inquiry qualitative study where I can really learn about their thoughts." And from this study there came three big findings.

One of them was that students had less anxiety in the writing classroom. They felt like it was very clear what they needed to do to get an A in the classroom or to get whatever grade they contracted for. And so, that was very freeing for a lot of them, just to give them a sense of control. And I think just less anxiety is good right now in any sort of context, where we had the pandemic that we're still in and the mass shootings and everything else. And so, I just feel like students are very traumatized right now and are dealing with so much that any chance that I can get to offer them a little bit less anxiety in a classroom is something that I'm really happy about. And so that was really, really nice to hear.

The other thing that I found is that students felt like they had more freedom with their writing. And if this wasn't my first time doing a qualitative research paper, I came from a degree in English Literature, a BA, and then I found out about this direct comp stuff. I was like, "Oh, this is really fascinating." So, if it wasn't my first time doing a sort of teacher inquiry qualitative study, I would've dug a little deeper with this question in terms of freedom with the writing. But one of the things that they said is that they felt like they weren't beholden to a rubric and they could really write, they didn't have to match the professor or instructor's exact ideals for writing. And so, that was interesting to see. I think part of that stems from, within my own classes, I didn't use or don't use rubrics. Instead, I use checklists that are co-constructed. And so maybe a

part of that question or their responses comes from that as well. But that was just interesting to see that they felt like they had more freedom with their writing, which I think is a positive. And the last thing that I noticed is that a fewer number of students felt like this layer-based grading system allowed for more diversity or more various language practices. And they also felt like they weren't punished for not meeting the, quote, unquote, "standard writing" or ideologies.

And so, I had one student specific who talked about his experience in high school and just feeling very not smart for not meeting standard language practices and coming into this class saying that he felt like he wasn't punished for not meeting that standard, and in fact, he could kind of take his writing in his own unique way. That gave me a lot of hope because that was one of the things that I was going for with, and a lot of the stuff that Asao Inoue talks about as well with this assessment method. And so, I was really happy to see that come through in the study.

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