

Episode 156: Anyea Hake

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

In this episode, Anyea Hake talks about teaching at Leech Lake Tribal College, Anishinaabe values empowering students, problematizing standardized English, and what she wished people knew about Tribal Colleges and Universities.

AH: I really want to empower students to feel comfortable to express, have their own form of expression in writing outside of prescriptive grammar. I want to concentrate on their message, their voice, and clarity, and I want for us to get away from these complex grammatical term diagramming sentences, all this stuff, because by saying there's a standard American English, you're using that standard by which to judge others, and it's a practice that we need to stop in academia.

Anyea Hake is the dean of Academics at Leech Lake Tribal College in Northern Minnesota. She's a former English composition in literature instructor for LLTC, Bemidji State University, and Turtle Mountain Community College. She has been with LLTC for eight years and has been working with tribal colleges for 11 years. A has devoted to the students' community and life in the North Woods, the tribal and ancestral lands of the Ojibwe and Dakota people.

Anyea, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You teach at Leech Lake Tribal College. Can you talk more about your institutional context?

AH: Our demographics, we're 92% indigenous students, largely Leech Lakers, but in the area, we also have White Earth Reservation and Red Lake reservation. They also have their own TCUs, but we do have community members that come to our college. We are open enrollment, which sometimes the community doesn't always understand, because we live right next to a larger community in Bemidji, Bemijigamaag in Ojibwemowin, and that has a large white population, but it also has a university, but they don't understand that the tribal college is open. We do have a lot of first-year students, first-generation students, although I'm happy to say that is kind of being reduced. So as we continue to outreach to the community, but we do have a number of students that have been out of college for a long time. At a university, they call them non-traditional students, and I don't even think we have a definition for that. So we have students right out of high school and we have students who are 50, 60, even 70, and we have a lot of non-degree seeking students from the community that want to bolster their computer skills or take in an art class or brush up on the language.

It is a rather poor area. Beltrami County, where a lot of our students live is the third-poorest county in the state. We're located in Cass County, which is right next to Beltrami County. So there's a lot of poverty. We also struggle with addiction use disorder a lot in the community. A lot of our students have experienced or have been exposed to that situation, and most of our students are parents. So we have a lot of kids, and we welcome children in the classroom. Let me see if I... I think I... so they're coming from all over. The Leech Lake Reservation is a really large reservation, which is a lot of it is actually water, but there's far-flung communities throughout the reservation. So sometimes, our students might be driving from far away.

Access to transportation, gas, and food security are also issues that our students face, and we try to mitigate the factors that we can control as much as possible through emergency aid and other things like we give away diapers. We have all sorts of things, because if we want to remove those basic needs securities from our students, so they can look towards their education a little bit more. Education always refers back to that old Maslow's hierarchy of needs. And our students can't concentrate on their education if they don't know where they're going to live or where their next meal is coming from.

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

AH: Yeah. Well, everything is connected to our mission statement, which is a quality higher education grounded in Anishinaabe values. And so when I'm teaching writing and I'm teaching English composition, we have to think of different ways to... Because we always want to find ways to decolonize something, but I'm teaching a colonized practice. And so one thing that I really find important when teaching writing, I've been teaching writing at TCU for about 10 years at... Eight at this one and two at Turtle Mountain. But I really want to empower students to feel comfortable to express, have their own form of expression in writing outside of prescriptive grammar. I want to concentrate on their message, their voice and clarity, and I want for us to get away from these complex grammatical term diagramming sentences, all this stuff, because by saying there's a standard American English, you're using that standard by which to judge others,

and it's a practice that we need to stop in academia, and we need to allow for language and communication to evolve.

And so that's something I really want my students to... Because there's a lot, especially around English, there's a lot of kind of just history of fear in the subject and that kind of generational trauma surrounding traditional education. And so to bring back comfort and support those students while still maintaining academic rigor, because we had one of our presidents talked about how she went to boarding school. Sometimes, they made things easier for the native students, and she said that it's like a not so subtle racism and lowered expectations. And so helping them achieve high expectations, but in a more comforting way and making sure they feel comfortable to continue to challenge other people on their notions of how somebody should use a language.

SW: Anyea, what does it look like to decolonize a colonized practice? What community-based knowledge practices are centered in your own classes?

AH: Yeah. Well, storytelling is an important tradition to many indigenous populations. There's even certain stories that we can't tell until there's snow on the ground, so we have to sometimes plan classes around that. But what I brought in, I recently revamped my Comp 1 class and I brought in a book by Thomas King called *The Truth About Stories*, and he's an indigenous author, and we get to talk about all sorts of issues that he brings up throughout his storytelling of... Basically, it's a narrative. And then, students can feel free to relate to him or not relate to him. We've had discussions about it. There's all sorts of challenging discussions that we can bring into it and people can identify with that experience.

So I wanted to get away from the traditional writing textbook. I've seen one, we've seen them all, and then it brings in all this exemplification and all these terms that they're like, "I don't know what you're talking about." And they also do an exercise at the beginning of the semester called the Decolonized Self, and it's one that kind of confuses them. It's from my online writing book. I just use OpenStax now, and it's confusing and challenging for them, but I find it sometimes when I get feedback about an assignment, I'm like, "Well, maybe we should ditch that, or maybe we should adjust it." And I've adjusted it a little bit, but I still think it's important for them to be challenged early on and break through and know that they can still do it.

I also changed my grading system to... It's based off of Sarah Zerwin's Pointless Grading System. So, to get away from that, they're pouring their soul out in a paper and they get a C or a D or 60 or 70 or whatever it is. And so it's just rated on its level of completeness. So it's out of 0, 1, 2. 2 being complete. You achieve the learning outcomes set forth in this course for the assignment that are tied to the course learning outcomes, whatnot. And 1, keep working at it. 0, you didn't hand it in or review the instructions. And so that way, I'm not crapping on their work. It all comes down to clarity, and I just try to encourage them as much as possible, especially in a first-year writing class, because that's where we get the loss from the students. That's where... If they can't get through that writing class, they're more likely to drop out and not make it, not persist to the next semester. And so we really try to concentrate on those core classes that we prescribe in the first semester.

SW: Can you talk a little bit more about your sequence of assignments or maybe even the alternative grading practices you draw from?

AH: Yeah, I have been transitioning into more scaffolding. I used to have four or five essays throughout the semester, and now, I just kind of... We're a small college. I think I forgot to mention that. We're sitting at about 169 students for the fall, which is good. Our numbers are on the rise where everybody else has kind of fallen off, but we're a small college. And so I just see how much writing and frivolous writing students are assigned, and they're just kind of stressed out about it. And so we need to look at our assessments and see how can I achieve the same learning outcomes with a different assignment, and it's not necessarily easier, but it just takes away that traditional big old paper, and they can express themselves and work on clarity in two paragraphs. And so that's where I ditched a paper and I made it into five reading responses that are throughout the semester based on the book, *The Truth About Stories*, and so that makes it easier.

Something that I do that makes students uneasy is I really front load the class, because it seems like at the end everybody's scrambling, but when you're front loading, it's really all about your messaging and to say "It's okay. This is what I do." And then by the end of the semester, they were happy that I did that because we're just doing come down and reflective activities at the end of the semester, and it looks like I have a ton of assignments when they look at the page, but I'm like, "A lot of these will take you five minutes. And a lot of them are, you did it or you didn't do it, because I provide feedback opportunities every week."

I also found that modeling, it was really important, especially for discussion boards, discussion boards are always a struggle, because I teach both asynchronously and in the classroom, but I still have the classroom students be on the discussion board with the asynchronous students. And so discussion boards are really tough for students. So if I don't get it, I found this out through somebody who was a real go-getter and wanted to do the whole semester in two weeks or something, but I found that participation went up in the discussion boards, because they saw somebody already doing it and then receiving encouragement from the instructor. And so if a student isn't doing that, then I'm on there showing an example of like if I were a student, I actually looked to see if I could create a fake student in Canvas, and so I could incognito post, but I can't.

SW: How are Anishinaabe values incorporated in your pedagogy and class?

AH: A lot of it is kind of connected back to my work with *The Truth About Stories* throughout the class, because that allows us to reflect on the indigenous experience in the context of Anishinaabe values, which are love, respect, bravery, truth, honesty, humility, and wisdom. And we kind of incorporate different reflection opportunities with the prompts for reading responses. And then, also, they pick their own topics for their essays, and we bring up different indigenous issues and those things we can talk about. Some students choose to look at other social issues, which is fine with me, but I guess, we're most strongly connected back to that when we're reviewing the online text and how we can look at these Western practices, which indigenous practices predate many of the documented Western practices.

So when we talk about rhetoric, we talk about that in context of indigenous history as well and how rhetoric evolved and the Anishinaabe equivalent of ethos, logos, pathos, mythos, kairos, and that kind of thing. So ethos, like credibility, so what is credibility and discussing that concept in terms of community and emotional connections. And that can be connected to mythos, because you're kind of connecting the community through their stories, and that's another way you can connect to your audience. And then logic, there's an indigenous research book that I referenced... I don't want to sign the whole book, because it's too much for the one class, but I bring in examples of that research and how you're documenting these practices, because sometimes I'm like, "I need three sources for this paper," but they don't understand that. The sources don't have to come from a book, it doesn't have to come from an online journal. There's many places for sources.

And so we talk about practices and how to ask an elder for something and remind the students what they need to offer, the elder, and do things in a respectful and a good way and an Anishinaabe way, even if the student isn't Anishinaabe, because we bring in all those practices and talk about things that are important to the community, but also how we can bring those community values, those Anishinaabe values out and to the world, out into other communities, because even people I live in Bemijigamaag, and even people in this community, even though they live right dead center between three reservations, they're just very ignorant to a lot of these practices and the people who founded this land that were all on. And so empowering students to kind of bring those messages out.

SW: What are some challenges to teaching writing at Leech Lake Tribal College?

AH: Yeah, it's 90% of the challenges that my students face, a lot of the deficits that they're coming in at, and it's attendance, getting work done. And so trying to find different ways to remove some barriers while still maintaining the academic rigor that I need them to meet, and that's things like giving them extra time on assignments, but also supporting them, so they don't let it get so far behind and providing opportunities for them to engage with the material outside of just a traditional classroom. So my asynchronous class and my in-person class, they have access to the same learning management system. And so the in-person class will still have my micro lectures and reminders and also designing different ways to get messaging out to students because with the pandemic, some faculty was like, "I'll just record my synchronous Zoom class." And I was like, "Nobody's going to watch that. I wouldn't watch it." Somebody was like, "Sent me just a lecture."

And so really, designing things for them to consume in small ways, because that's how we consume things now. It's just become a societal thing. I love reading a book, but if I'm on my phone just phoning and I see a wall of words, I'm like, "I might be clicking away." So I try to do things in bite-sized portions, because they're busy. They're very busy, because some teachers are, "Oh, the students are so lazy." I was like, "No, they're not lazy." And I got this... It was from one of my pandemic professional development, but somebody said, "They're not lazy. They're just ruthlessly efficient." And so understanding how they're going to go through and consume your course and take things in is really important, because they want to be as efficient as possible, but sometimes, that means they might skip over something that is going to make them successful on an assignment.

And so I have to really think about course design and navigation, and then also making sure that they know what resources the college has to offer them. We can do emergency aid \$700 one time a semester, and we also are currently, until our COVID funds dry up, offering inflation stipends for students. And that's been a big help for people in the community, especially a lot of our students are working full time, their parents, and so we need to understand how students use the course rather than making the same. It's that old meme like, "No, it's the children who are wrong. I'm not old and stuffy," but be able to evolve our pedagogical and anthropological practices with the student population. So understanding the student population is huge and knowing the struggles that they face and being supportive while still helping them maintain the academic level that they need to be at.

SW: Anyea, what do you enjoy the most about teaching at Leech Lake Tribal College?

AH: Community and humor is a big part of indigenous culture, and so bringing in those opportunities for us to laugh together and talk about things that we enjoy best in the area or challenges that everybody faces, and we can all relate to is a big part of it. And then, I also just watching the confidence in the students grow, because we have a developmental writing class too, and students are often worried to take Comp 1 right away, and sometimes they want to take the developmental writing class even though it may not be necessary. And I was like, "Well, if you're not feeling super confident, you can go there, but I can help you." So, yeah, it's just really talking to the students and getting to know the path that they've been walking and the path that they want to walk is really important to me.

I think humor is just a way of disarming and you're not so serious all the time, and you can make connections through it. And being a part of the community is really important as well, so you're not just... For me, I think about half our instructors are indigenous, the other half are not, but I grew up in this community, but even showing that you're willing to embrace those values and that you can joke around and you're not just so stuffy, because ideally somebody teaching writing to an indigenous population, they would look like the indigenous population, but unfortunately, the humanities have been kind of taken in the shorts for a while. And so we just need to grow our own writing instructor for down the line for the future. And so that's what we really want as we want the community to benefit, and we want to understand that we're there to support them as a sovereign nation. We are their college, and we're there for them. So, yeah, the humor piece is just really... Everybody's always joking. Especially elders, they'll always have some good ones ready for you.

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

AH: I think sometimes people tend to undervalue TCUs. They think, "Oh, it was easier, or it's not a real education." They also think that students go there for free. They do not. Any institution they go to, they will have to pay for or whatever, but I really wish they understood that everybody's welcome. It would be great if we had a bigger population to learn more so they could bring that knowledge back out and understand our students and understand just all the challenges that the population is facing. There's a lot of stigma around some of the challenges that our students face, such as substance use disorder, and those stigmas do not help with

healing. And so at the college, we try to destigmatize those things so people feel welcome and they can continue their path to healing or whatever good walk that they want to walk. And so I wish the community would understand more about that and kind of get away from these age-old stereotypes. So we need to come at it with more of an understanding and fewer stereotypes.

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