

Episode 64: Beck Wise

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Beck Wise about teaching technical and professional communication at the University of Queensland in Australia, feminist and critical pedagogies, medical rhetoric, and cross-disciplinary collaborations.

Beck Wise is Lecturer in Professional Writing and director of the major in Professional Writing & Communication at the University of Queensland. Beck's research investigates how science is used in public debates about social justice, and writing pedagogy for large classes. Their work appears in *Rhetoric of Health & Medicine*, *Research in Online Literacy Education* and *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, among other venues.

Beck, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: So you teach technical writing and professional communication at the University of Queensland in Australia. Can you talk about how teaching writing is framed given your institutional and geographic context?

BW: I'll start by just giving you a little bit of background and then just explain Australia 101 and then loop through what it looks like where I am now. I work at the University of Queensland, which is in Brisbane, Australia. If you kind of overlay Australia on a U.S. map, we're sort of level with Virginia on the coast there. It is a research institution, one of our group of eight universities, and again, R1 type university. I've been here for about eighteen months. It's my second job out of grad school. And we have two majors in writing. We have a major in creative writing and a major in professional writing and communication. I got employed to come in and do the professional writing and communication major. It got forked off from creative writing a couple of years ago. I work with a lot of creative writers. The major is a little bit of a patchwork job right now. We're going to keep building it out. So it's pulled together from whatever sort of creative writing, communication classes already existed and could contribute to professional writing. It's a little bit of a weird one.

I teach a little mishmash of classes. I teach grammar and style class that's required for our creative writing majors, now education majors, not our professional writing majors. I teach a first-year composition class, which I'll be doing next semester. Just an option that anyone in the university can take. I teach a post-grad class in a workplace communication that looks a little bit different every year. It's just in its second year now. I have this kind of interesting mix of students. Obviously everything's multi-major because here in Australia we teach all our classes as lecture and tutorial style. We don't do those kinds of small seminars and a characteristic of that U.S. context.

SW: I've got to ask, what's that like? Because that lecture style, so teaching hundreds of students about writing in one large class is so different than many first-year writing classes in the U.S. which have 20-25 students, classes meet two or three times a week, and maybe teachers approach first-year writing through a more conversational or workshop model like lens.

BW: The first thing I want to say about that is I did my PhD in the United States. I was raised on that workshop model that you described. Twenty-five students where they meet three times a week, talking to each other and working with drafts and you would be amazed how much you can cram into three class meetings a week compared to what you can do when you suddenly find yourself trying to switch to one big lecture and one tutorial a week. I got back to Australia and found this out after I started. I was like, "Oh God. Oh no." That's how I got thrown straight into it. It's one of the things I've been doing actually since I graduated, studying how to do kind of...how do we teach writing effectively in these lecture and tutorial contexts because we don't have scholarship that addresses that. We have every so often there's, someone's thing, "I tried this and it was a disaster." Sort of like the 80s, 90s, 2000s. Michael Ferris at Texas Tech, I think he's doing something like this at the moment.

We teach a one-hour lecture once a week and then a one and a half hour tutorial. The first-year comp class here at my current institution is pretty small by Australian standards at 100 students. At my last job our first-year comp class was about 300-400 every semester. Here, because it's an elective, it's only about 100 every semester. I work with a team of tutors. My job is sort of somewhere in between a WPA and a general Assistant Professor. My job is to handle the admin for the class, to design and deliver the lectures. I also do tutorial designs that are optional for my tutors, so they can use them if they want to, but if they have their own stuff that still serves the learning outcomes, that's fine.

My first-year comp class, we meet early in the week. We try and do all the broad principle stuff in lecture. I sort of zoom through it. And then, when we get into the tutorial space, that's where we start trying to do all of that workshop, like a U.S.-style workshop. The real issue is that when you're splitting content out in that way, and you've got 75 minutes of active learning in a week, you've really got to cut it down. I would say I do maybe 50% of what I would have done in a U.S. semester, if that. In terms of kind of the amount of ground we cover, we do probably a little bit less writing overall. We're also on a 12 or 13-week semester so getting those revision cycles in can be tricky as well.

SW: As a teacher you prioritize inclusivity and equity and one way you do this is through feminist and critical pedagogies and theories. Do you mind talking about what it looks like to draw from these frameworks in technical and professional communication classes?

BW: So for me, one of the ways that has really manifested since I've been back here in Australia has been trying to think about how authority works in the classroom. So, working in a workshop model I think it can be a little bit easier to sort of decenter yourself in the classroom, right? It is

extremely hard to do that when you're standing in front of a lecture hall. I'm not sure I have a solution to that. That's really what I've been trying to work through, is how can I in this sort of physical environment and institutional context find ways to promote student agency? To get myself out of that authority space and to work more like a facilitator in the classroom? So in the grad class last semester, the way that we did that was by pushing all of the student work into self-directed projects where I was having them setting their own goals for what it is they want to learn. We did principles, and then everything after that was student directed. Students were setting their own goals for what they wanted to figure out over the course of the semester. They were producing all of the core principles that we were doing...there were, I think week two was accessibility and then it sort of waded the whole way through thinking about how we can create documents that are more inclusive, more equitable, more just.

Yeah, we saw some really cool assignments out of that as well. Almost 50% creative writers in that class and then a mix of other things. At first, we're going to talk about instructions and memos, it's going to be so fun. They looked at me like, "I'm sorry, where are the novels?" But I sort of came around and ended up doing some really awesome things. A bunch of them made materials for our student press. The creative writing program has a student press. One of my favorites was someone who ended up doing an accessibility order for the museum she worked at and creating a public facing accessibility and sustainability guide that had measured all the doorframes among other things, as well as running training for her coworkers about how I can work more effectively with patrons with disabilities.

SW: It sounds like you're teaching technical writing and professional communication to a lot of students with a creative writing background. How do you bring these two areas together? Or how do you support their agency as creative writers through more professional genres?

BW: So the way I did that last year was to...again it was the first time the course had been offered. So it had been put on the books before I started – one of the creative writers had designed it. I sort of came in and laid out the readings and stuff and did the assessment design, but the topics were sort of set for me. So last semester, what I tried to do was just to let students, through their assessed work, shape it to their needs. The assessment sequence was a communication order of a workplace. What is the workplace communication that happens where you are? Go out there and look at it and see what's happening in like a team or whatever, offer appraisal for fixing some kind of communication issue within the workplace...so they figured out their own communication problems and then put together a portfolio of documents that addressed it.

This year I'm teaching them for the second time and I've actually changed it up a heap. My expectation is that most of my students are going to be unemployed. Obviously the kinds of work that students are doing has really evaporated. I'm expecting a lot of my students to be unemployed. And I did find last year that the students who didn't have current jobs or the handful that hadn't ever had a job really struggled with that assignment design. Since I'm expecting kind of a bit more of a disrupted semester, I think students are going to probably need a bit stronger

direction, maybe more on and off points in order to get through a semester. I've switched up all my assessments so we're doing smaller projects. We're doing hypothetical things, some of which have that flex to accommodate student interests and some of which don't.

So we're going to do job ad analysis. What are the communication skills in your target industry. We're doing an instructions and user testing module. So normally I do Lego on day one. I love Lego. So, we dump it all out and make instructions and build things and laugh at whatever nonsense creation people come up with. I want to do that, but I think Lego is probably like a disgusting pit of disease with all the little holes in it. So we're not doing Lego. I'm making students do instructions for blanket forts. I also didn't want to send them to the grocery store to do recipes. So we're doing blanket forts. Do instructions for a blanket fort. We'll pass them off to someone who's used similar materials and they can do a user test but use a report and then revise and resubmit. I'm not 100% sure how this is going to go down with my oldest students.

SW: You also do a lot of work in medical rhetoric and visual rhetoric, yeah?

BW: I encountered that work when I was in cultural studies. So like a lot of people I came rhetoric at the grad school stage. Rhetoric is not a thing really outside of the U.S., the field is really dominated there. There's a bit happening in Europe, but certainly in Australia, it's all but non-existent. Even as an undergrad I was kind of interested in the cultural dimensions of science and how we talk about science and how science is used. After I finished my BA, I had the degree structured a little bit different...so you have the option here of doing a one-year honors year, which is research focused. It's kind of like a one-year Master's program in the U.S. So I did an honors year in gender studies and then after I finished undergrad I worked for a few years. I was a quilt magazine editor for years, which is actually the first time I ever heard of technical writing. I didn't realize it was a real thing until like 10 years later.

Then when I started grad school, I was applying for gender studies, cultural studies Master's programs. So my Master's thesis was sort of still looking at the same work. I was doing a little bit of...I did some anthropology classes and I did some gender studies classes. You had about a year and someone said to me, "Oh, hey, do you know that's rhetoric?" I was like, "No, what is that?" They said, "Come to this class." I went to class like, "Oh yeah, okay. I see, this is what I'm doing."

I think the Australian cultural studies sort of has some things in common with rhetoric and especially with cultural rhetoric. Historically Australian cultural studies has been interested in what texts do in the world. It sort of comes down to this large lecture format again. So, in our majors we offer a really limited number of classes. We offer a lot of big classes. Because of that, you're sort of forced towards more of a survey model. If I were in the U.S., would I have a really neat third-year medical rhetoric, maybe reproductive justice class? Hell yes.

SW: You have this co-written article with Dr. Ariella Van Luyn, a creative writer and teacher at the University of New England about disciplinary identifications. And you all focus on this

question, what are we as academics talking about when we talk about writing? I think one thing you all are doing in this article is calling attention to histories and the perception and social implications that exist when we approach writing from a narrow lens. Right? So we are closing the door on possibilities when we don't imagine the cross-disciplinary collaborations that can happen between other disciplinary identities. I think you all are suggesting we approach and make more visible all our disciplinary efforts and investments into writing. Right?

BW: Ariella was my colleague at the University of New England. That was my first job out of grad school. It's like a regional comprehensive and it's like 90% online. Australia has like 40 universities serving an area the size of the continental U.S., mostly posted in our big cities. So we have a really strong tradition of online and distance education in the regional institutions in particular. The way that it came about that was Ariella and I were hired in the same search. So we both responded to the same job hunt that was like, "We want a lecturer in writing, we want someone that can do public and professional writing, we want someone with industry experience" and we both applied for this job and they ended up hiring both of us out of that same search.

I came in from the U.S. rhetoric and writing sort of edging into tech comm and Ariella is a novelist and a short story writer. We both sort of walked into this having come from different disciplinary backgrounds. But what we found when we started working together, so we worked together on a grant application for a digital storytelling lab. We worked together on an editing class and what we found was that we had sort of the same ideas about process, the same ideas about how writing should be happening and how writing should be taught, even though we'd come at it from these really different perspectives. What was sort of rough for us was figuring out the home for that kind of work.

Australia has a professional organization for creative and professional writing, but they generally publish creative writing, right? So I was kind of like, "Well, where does my work fit in here?" This is a major...it just has creative writing units and so for us, what we sort of came to realize was that even though we're coming at these things from really different perspectives, there was enough of a shared ground that it could fit together under a broader idea of writing studies. But in Australia, so, whenever we talk about writing in Australia that basically means creative writing. Writing studies as a professional space or an affiliation or an alignment, whatever you want to call it, in Australia that doesn't really exist. People are scattered all over the place. It's not like a clear home.

Our position in this article was what if we stopped talking about writing to just mean creative writing. What if we could find a way to bring together all of these different spaces where writing is happening and being taught. Pull in the people that are in writing center work out of student services, pull in the people that are doing English language support, pull in the people who did business communication and think about how we can build the area of writing studies kind of

defragment it in a way, which I think it has implications for publishing, it has implications for career progression.

I was talking to a very senior guy in the school of business here...found out about him by accident because they're business linguists and they do genre analysis but they like studying writing and teaching writing. I thought maybe we could find a way to collaborate where we could write a response about the Australian context...Australian universities are super, super dependent on international student income. So there's a lot of discussion around them.

Yeah, language fluency and student outcomes, so I wrote to these two guys who I had no idea existed and sort of introduce myself and the senior guy, Bernard McKenna said to me, he'd started off in scientific and technical communication and he had changed out of that field because he found it really demoralizing to go to the Communication Association meetings and to talk about writing to always an empty room. So he'd switched over to kind of this more philosophical business community. So we have wisdom in business dealings and communication now. And that was sort of my experience, too. I went to the Australasian Association of Writing Programs doing this work that's like rhetoric and composition and tech comm, and it says it's an association for professional writing, but it's not, right? The interest isn't there. So for me, one of the big things, I think about career progression publications is really about how to make this work legible in a context where there is no history of technical communication, of rhetoric and composition. What are the spaces for this and where do I find the people that are doing this?

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