

Episode 70: Brice Nakamura

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Brice Nakamura about teaching in a two-year college and at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in central California, placement, transfer, student success, collaborative classroom practices, and online teaching.

Brice Nakamura has been an educator in California's Central Valley for over a decade. He is currently a professor at College of the Sequoias, where he teaches English composition courses. He holds an MA in Composition Theory from Fresno State and is finishing an MS in Education with an emphasis in Online Teaching and Learning from CSU East Bay.

Brice, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I'm always interested in hearing more about students and institutional contexts. You teach at the College of the Sequoias which is a two-year Hispanic Serving Institution in central California. What challenges or barriers do your students face? And in what ways has the College of the Sequoias and/or your teaching and pedagogical practices helped overcome these challenges to help support student success?

BN: One of the things that I can really speak to for sure are placement tests and below transfer level sequences. We have done a lot of work at the California community college level to sort of like “undo.” To kind of give you a little bit of a history, when you come into a community college, oftentimes you have to take a placement test, right? A lot of it is very grammar-based and very sentence structure-based and things like that. But what we find is that a lot of these tests very disproportionately place students of color, particularly, into below transfer level sequences. So instead of going straight into a transfer level English 1 class, they'll have to take a class, one or two, or sometimes even three levels below that. Meaning that they'll have to go through a 300-level class, a 200-level class, a 100-level class, and then they can get into that English 1 class, for example.

So at College of the Sequoias we had two below transfer level classes, English 360, which is a basic skills writing class. We had a 251, which is like college writing prep class. And then there was the official English 1 College Composition class that transfer students on to Cal State or UC. What's happening, though, was the placement tests, the measures that we were using to place students in these classes, the majority of campuses were just using that test. They weren't looking at other multiple measures, such as high school GPA, number of courses they took in a sequence. So for math and English, what happened was a lot of students of color were placed into below transfer level classes.

You look at the data for this, and the longer it takes you, the less likely you are to pass through and get through English 1 and transfer to an institution. Because some of these classes are 6 units a piece and some students are not having to take just a writing class. There are some institutions

where there's two or three levels below transfer, but there's a reading class and a writing class. Sometimes 10 units, sometimes 16 to 20 units of pre-college level work before they can actually get into an English 1 class that will transfer. So this data starts coming out and we start looking at success rates and throughput and things like that. We start noticing this as a real equity issue across the board. And some colleges start to respond to that.

There were a couple of different measures. One was to accelerate the coursework. So instead of having students take two classes at COS for example, we created a course that was a 5-unit course. That was like an accelerated English class that was designed to help students get through that remedial or pre-transfer level work faster. So that they could get into English 1. That definitely helps our success rates. But we received guidance from the Chancellor and there was a state...it was actually passed into our California Ed Code through Assembly Bill 705. There were a number of different measures that were used.

The other thing that happened was we started implementing multiple measures. So you couldn't just use a placement test anymore. I think at this point, the majority of community colleges have done away with placement tests altogether. And instead, we are looking at things like high school GPA. In that, we found that students who receive an overall high school GPA of 2.7 or higher, 75% of students will pass an English 1 if they're placed into that class with no extra support, with no remedial pre-transfer level course they have to take before that. So that was definitely something that we took...something that we did.

A lot of institutions as well before that had GPA requirements of 3.2, 3.5, and those kinds of things, which really was a high barrier for students who were trying to get into English 1 and pass it. So that was definitely, I think, those are some of the biggest barriers that we've overcome at least here at community colleges, at Hispanic-Serving Institutions. Placing the majority of them into pre-transfer level classes were harming our success rates, were harming students' ability to complete their educational roles and get through English 1. I think those are two of the largest barriers that are facing students at Hispanic-Serving Institutions.

SW: Brice, I'm thinking about your institutional context, both as a two-year college and as an HSI: How do you draw on students' perspectives, experiences, and histories in your first-year writing class?

BN: One of the things that I try to do is bring in some of those marginalized voices wherever I can. One of my favorite texts to have students read at least portions of is Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*, I think is what it's called. So we'll read a chapter or two of that which is always really good. I try to also incorporate students' own perspectives and beliefs into some of the units that I teach. For example, there's a unit that I'll teach on monsters and have students research a cultural icon or a monster. So at my Hispanic-Serving Institution, some students from Hispanic backgrounds may choose to write about la araña, I'm saying that terribly and I apologize, or Chupacabra. Those kinds of things are oftentimes brought in as texts and things that they're looking at. So they're researching accounts of those monsters in history. They're looking at the background and their own, I had a student once who interviewed her grandma who had witnessed a Chupacabra back in her village. So that was an authentic text for that research

paper that a student conducted an interview for. That was kind of a really fun unit to teach. I enjoy it.

There's another instructor who does this as well. I actually took this idea from her, if I can call it that. We're instructors, we all steal from each other all the time. But she goes into like podcasts about serial killers. There's a textbook, she reads with it called, *Tracking the Chupacabra*. So students really focus on that particular monster for their things. That text is about looking for and finding the Chupacabra. And would then look at those cultural artifacts.

SW: It sounds like there's a vast opportunity or opportunities to explore culture and community at an HSI and two-year college. What are some other unique advantages about teaching in your institutional context?

BN: I think that we are...how do I say it? I thought about this question kind of in terms of the COVID-19 crisis that we're currently faced with. I feel like we're kind of poised to sort of be one of the best places for people to bounce back. We're kind of poised to help students sort of enter back into the workforce, retrain, gain more education to move up or advance in their career. And that we're not worried about enrollments, we're not worried about losing funding. Well, we are maybe concerned about State budgets and things like that, but a place where the community can rally and regroup in light of the COVID-19 crisis. I think is maybe the way I thought about that question.

SW: What you're talking about reminds me of your institution's mission statement. So the College of the Sequoias mission statement says that "Sequoias Community College District is dedicated to student learning, success, and equity by providing transfer education, basic skills, and workforce development for our diverse student population." How does this mission affect your teaching?

BN: I really appreciate the mission of COS and the mission of Hispanic-Serving Institutions in general. Just because we're serving a group that has maybe been marginalized in the world of academia. And so, we are a place where students can feel welcome, especially students of color, can feel welcome and can feel encouraged because we are an institution that is for them, specifically, in a lot of ways. We all recognize that many of our students are first-generation students and are coming to school through DACA, we're very sensitive to that. So we work to serve and protect really, those groups of students. For example, I believe a couple of years ago, there was a push by the current administration to ask for DACA records.

I might have to go back and double check this, but I believe that COS kind of put out a statement saying that we won't release that. So we work to help students because many of our students are the sons and daughters of migrant workers who came here and brought their children with them or students who came here and were born here to families who weren't actual citizens. That's definitely something we are sensitive to and that we work to serve those groups.

SW: What are some sustainable classroom or program practices that help support students at the College of the Sequoias?

BN: I think that one of the things that I really strive for in my class is to teach students how to be good students, especially early in the semester. I want to help them build those skills. I feel a lot of times when a student is not successful in my class, it's usually because of their student skills, maybe were lacking or things like that. I try to help really build up those skills early in the semester with things like a detailed Canvas tour to help them get used to the learning management system. A lot of students, it's their first time in college, their first time using Canvas, first semester, especially. They may be like, "I'm very new to Canvas and none of my other instructors are using it. So what do I do with it?"

I try to give them a really detailed tour of it with a video kind of explaining things. I also try to make sure that I'm teaching them to dedicate time every week to their classes, making sure that they're scheduling it. So like Wednesdays from six o'clock to eight o'clock, I'll work on my business communications classwork. Friday mornings, I have time so I'll work on my English homework then. Those kinds of things. And to make sure that they're sharing that with their families. So that they're aware that hey, I really need to study, especially students who are taking multiple online classes because their families may not necessarily respect that. It's important for them to be defensive of that time, because I know that students are managing different demands with family obligations, with needing to work.

It's important that their families are onboard. So sharing that with their family members is definitely a key component as well. Also, to make sure that they're doing things like checking in the day that the module starts. If the module opens up on Monday and things are due Thursday, make sure you check in on Monday and just, 20 minutes, 30 minutes just read through the assignments. Check if there's a module overview page, make sure that you're reading through those things. Like one of the first assignments in my classes is just to send me an email. I teach them a little bit about email etiquette just because I feel like that's something that's always expected of students. I always hear instructors like, "Oh, students don't know how to send proper emails." And I'm like, "Because nobody's teaching them."

So that's an easy first assignment in the first week just to get them turning something in it's like, watch this short video about email etiquette and then send me an email introducing themselves. Because that gets them to practice using the email system that we have through Office 365, but also opens up a line of dialogue between us. So that if they're struggling with something it's not awkward in week six, when they're like, "I don't know how to do this assignment." Or "I'm struggling with this piece of technology." They know that they can contact me. That email chain is already up somewhere that they can just find it, reply to the message and say, "Hey, I'm having a problem with this." Or "Can you explain more about this?" It just makes that communication easier later in the semester.

Because students are definitely, at a community college, at Hispanic-Serving Institutions... there's the perception that we're scary and don't want to deal with students and those kinds of things. That they're intruding on our time, but they're not. I have student hours where every week, I just sit and wait for students to come and hang out with me or ask questions. So that's definitely something that I do to help build up sustainability. Student success strategies are just baked into my pedagogy.

SW: Jumping off of how you build these practices to support students and to help familiarize them with classroom goals and expectations, I'm interested in hearing more about how you reconstruct the English classroom a bit because of students' perhaps negative experiences with writing or traditional English classrooms?

BN: Yes. Sure. You're saying that, and I'm thinking specifically about workshop feedback. And so many students, myself included, we've had experiences with getting feedback from an instructor on an essay. You get it back and it's just covered in red ink and things like that. So one of the things I do with students early in the semester is I try to just get that out in the open and talk about feedback. I ask them to share experiences, like what's the most critical piece of feedback you've ever received? And I share my own. I asked them also about what's maybe the most helpful or the most beneficial piece of feedback you've ever received. This might be something I do before we were to exchange for peer review in class, to just set norms about. We're going to make sure that we give constructive criticism, but also that we are raising or acknowledging things that are working in the writing. Because it feels good to have that positive feedback.

I try to bring that into different contexts. Many of my students might play video games for example, or something like that. I talk about like, you're getting feedback in a video game, in all kinds of ways. You're getting a score, right? That's feedback. Or you're learning about some kind of data in the way that you play. You're trying to improve your time or those kinds of things. Your success rates definitely, like feedback, that you seek out. Writing is no different, and that we're all just trying to get better. Writing is very personal. It's a very personal thing that you're then sharing with somebody. But it's good to receive feedback about where you're at in your writing and that might be a way to help reconstruct that scenario and help students understand where they have blind spots in their writing.

SW: Have you found a good way to center collaboration related to peer review through online teaching?

BN: I definitely have like the week before we do a workshop in my class, we will set norms like that where I have them read, "Responding to Student Writing" and "Shitty First Drafts." So those are kind of two pieces that I ask them to start with. Then I ask some of those questions, like what is the best and worst piece of feedback you've ever received on your writing? Set it up as a Google doc that we all go in and edit together and add our own contribution or expectations, that I can then synthesize into some ideas for them as well. I feel, too, you've got to build a sense of community and trust between students. Like asking them to post and reply to discussion boards is good, but also maybe include some fun stuff along the way, if you can.

So early on in the semester, like the first discussion board assignment is to tell us about something new in a hobby that you have, for example, and post a picture of it. Students will engage in that. Sometimes also in the semester, I'll have a discussion board where the assignment is to do something that makes you happy and, again, just post a picture. You don't have to be in the picture, but do something fun. Tell us about it in the discussion board and give us a photo of it. So students would be like, "I went to the zoo." "I hung out..."

Like in a normal classroom, where you meet face to face, students come in and some of them are on their phones or they'll have those small conversations. You have to recreate those 10 minutes before class starts, like what that looks like when you open the door and you start letting students in. How can you recreate that? I can recreate assignments and discussions in class as best I can. How do you recreate those 10 minutes where students are learning about each other? That I think is the key that I'm trying to find.

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