Episode 131: Brooke Carlson
Transcript

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

Brooke A. Carlson (he/him/his) teaches rhetoric and composition, literature, and Shakespeare, under the auspices of a general education at an institution of higher education. Raised in Colorado, the son of public-school teachers, Brooke earned a bachelor's degree in English and French at Bowdoin College, taught high school English for five years in Portland, Maine, and then earned a Ph.D. in Early Modern Literature at the University of Southern California. Brooke taught internationally in Seoul, South Korea, and Honolulu, Hawai'i, before returning to the US and Colorado, where he is now an Instructor of English at Colorado Mesa University. Brooke researches and writes about the early modern stage, the (Korean) Shakes, technology, composition, pedagogy/assessment, and what it means to be human. Brooke is keen on technology to connect and communicate. You can find him out there on Twitter with @unibcarlson.

Brooke, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You teach at Colorado Mesa University in Grand Junction, Colorado. Tell us a bit about your institutional context, where you teach and what you teach, your position within that program and how you got into teaching.

BC: Right on. You're welcome, Shane. Thank you for having me and congratulations on the book. I'm a big fan of radio, podcasts, and your podcast Pedagogue. It's both an honor and a pleasure to talk with you. So, Colorado Mesa University was founded in 1925. It's a regional public institution serving some 10,000 students with an emphasis on Western Colorado or the Western slope. Our students are often coming from underserved schools and conditions, and our goal is to support and strengthen that student experience such that the students succeed and give back in their and our local communities. I'm an instructor here at Colorado Mason University in the Department of Languages, Literature, and Mass Communication. Maybe a smaller part of that big division is English, but we have a lot of things going on in that space and that's part of a broadening or a changing space in the humanities, which we might talk a little bit about later.

Anyway, I teach four-four, so evenly divided between rhetoric and composition and literature. I teach both of our two-part composition classes, English 111 and English 112. In other places it might be 101 and 102, or some sort of enumeration. I also teach a mythology class that's English 222. That's part of our essential learning curriculum and a literature survey, English 254, which is English Lit from its beginnings through the enlightenment as well as a Shakespeare class, which is an English 355. I taught a J-term experience in January and I'm teaching an overload this fall semester. I received my PhD in early modern English literature from the University of Southern California. I did that, earned a PhD in philosophy under the direction of Bruce Smith. My concentration, of course, is early modern English literature. In my time at USC, I was fortunate to get to learn from and work with Bruce and Rebecca Lemon and Heather James. They were the early modern scholars in a wonderful English department.

So, my dissertation, I explored the emergence of the early modern stage as a direct result of the shift in capitalism, ground and operation notion of profit and pleasure, and I argue it's dependent upon the shape shifting ability of the human body. My training was in large part then really intended for the work of teaching and researching early modern literature in higher ed. At the same time, I taught high school English for five years before going to graduate school. In graduate school, I also taught in both the writing program and then what was called thematic option, which was a gifted and talented program that allowed graduate students to teach theme-based literature workshops. So in addition to my early modern training, I was continuing to work in the field largely speaking of teaching and rhetoric and composition. I worked as a coordinator in the writing program at USC and the composition courses there were paired with the general education class such that the readings and content came from the gen ed course. Then the ranked faculty member from that course was paid by the university to lecture and teach several hundred students, and those same students were then placed into smaller groups of around 18 or 20 and taught by grad students like me to research and to write at the college level.

One of the advantages to my experience was that I got to sit in on lots of classes and observe lots of excellent and few not so good college professors teaching their gen ed classes. Observation like this was a wonderful job training component as the teacher of composition classes. I think to classes on the other hand…those were the gifted and talented program classes. They offered me a chance to teach literature at the college level. So that was a cool thing that I got to do again as a graduate student, even though I'd been doing it at a high school level too. And one of the best things about that experience for me was the guidance that Penny Young, who was then the director, provided us in the creation of crafting syllabi. That was a cool experience when you got to think about what books would I want to teach, why would I want to teach them, how would I group them? How would I craft in a paragraph thing that students might be excited about other than just me? And I'm really interested in that, which is great for me and for grad students, it's that audience, but the idea that undergrads might be excited by that and normal people was really important. Those were difficult and rewarding and fun meetings with Penny about syllabi and how to construct those. That was a really cool thing. I also got to teach a critical thinking class for high school students, the trio Upward Bound Math and Science program.

I feel really fortunate looking backwards in my PhD program in addition to five years of high school English. I had nine years of teaching at the college level in and along with the pursuit of my doctorate, so I had a lot of background in teaching there, and I think that helped immensely. In terms of research and writing and my PhD in early modern English literature, I think that served me really well. I don't teach rhetoric and composition as a literature class. I know that there's a body of faculty and there's a body of research out there about teaching rhetoric and composition as literature, and I get that. I don't do that. I've changed that over time.

Research is primarily digital in rhetoric and composition, and I would argue pretty much in all of our stuff today, in this 21st century digital world, my early modern beginnings were thus always ground in technology and what we now speak of as the digital humanities or DH. The stage was a new technology in the early modern era and art. The play text or the written word is always already moving through technology in ways that matter. My background in early modern stage is very much about the skills of critical thinking, information literacy, and written in communication, and these are three of the core competencies at the university, along with oral

communication and quantitative thinking, written communication, critical thinking, and information literacy are also front and center in rhetoric and composition and brief.
My background in early modern English literature has been significant in the way that I approach teaching composition.

SW: Brooke, you have a range of teaching experiences from high school to USC to South Korea, to Hawaii to Colorado. How has your pedagogy adapted or adjusted between these institutional contexts and what have you learned about students given this range of experience?

BC: Yeah, my first job upon completion of the PhD was in Seoul, South Korea, which is a fantastic place to be. I studied in Paris, France as an undergraduate. I spent a summer in Verona, Italy as a graduate student. I think studying abroad is a tremendous learning opportunity. I encourage anyone who can to study abroad. It's necessary for fluency in a language certainly, but the greater gifts are around knowledge of self, knowing who you are and what you're capable of and what have you as a teacher. Teaching internationally is also a rewarding and impactful experience. As an American, it was a colonizing experience for me in South Korea. I was teaching in English with no Korean language skills. The trajectory hadn't been Korean and Korea and so on and so forth. As I mentioned, I speak French and Italian, but they're of no benefit whatsoever when it comes to Korean. So that was big, was jumping off the diving board into an unknown there, and that was cool. Seoul is a fabulous place to be.

I was also teaching an American cultural experience or a phenomenon of the American liberal arts experience as an international faculty. So, my foreign PhD was important for universities there in terms of numbers and standings and funding, which is important. What was important for me though, were those skills or the student learning outcomes as I would come to better explain them as I got to know them really. When I moved to Hawaii and started working in assessment of the core competencies, I did that in my first four years at Chaminade University in Hawaii, and I led our faculty through the assessment of those five core competencies. It was a fantastic experience and way to get to know the university and also to look at the forest and not the trees and say, "Okay, this is why we're here. This is what the college experience is supposed to do."

My pedagogy is much more fluid linguistically as a result of teaching internationally. I'm not particularly concerned with editing and with grammar and mechanics, although we do that sort of work regularly in my classrooms by writing collaboratively. That is to say, we all get in a shared doc, and we write and revise. Usually in the beginning, I've done exercises where we all jump into a shared doc and we do a free write first, and then I ask students to bring some words from that free write that they think sound good and drop them into that shared doc. Then I ask us to create a poem out of that, and it's a cool start because we're all sort of weird and we're in the same space. We're on the screen, or we can do that even outside of the classroom at the same time. We're all in the space of these words and we're writing over each other or trying not to, and some people are jumping in with great crazy fonts and some are using yellow, which you can't read. All kinds of silly stuff happens, and it's fun. It's a great way to create a start, but I do that regularly. I have us writing collaboratively in the same document to get at writing, which is always already a process of revising. We also read, write, and revise through discussion boards. Writing in groups is one way to reveal writing, the difficulty of it, and the power and the joy in

it, right? It’s so cool when you get the sentence that says what you want it to say, right? That’s a great experience. I also think along writing and language too, along the lines of code and code switching and the importance and the benefits of speaking multiple languages, having been in France and Italy and South Korea, our American college population today is far more diverse than it used to be, and so many of our students now come to the classroom with multiple languages and grammars and mechanics, and they bring that with them to the table.

I also use appropriate and meaningful technology to write, and that for me has meant Twitter and Instagram for the last seven or eight years. In addition to that discussion and the digital tools that we can do to write collaboratively, those spaces allow students in learning communities to communicate, reflect, and produce digital content across multiple spaces, even in conjunction with larger and public facing audiences, which I think is a really, really good thing. This idea that the ivory tower or academia or higher education is closed is bad news. That’s bad news bears; these spaces that are public facing and transparent and open, they allow students in learning communities to communicate, to reflect, and to produce digital content across multiple spaces in conjunction with larger public facing audiences. I have to share with you that even though I’ve used those spaces, Twitter and Instagram, for example, for seven or eight years now, the number of times that someone outside of my classroom community and my learning experience has jumped into those conversations or those tweets or those Instagram posts, I can count on one hand. Usually, it’s a mom or a friend or somebody who’s connected to the student or a past student who jumps in and shares something there. I think students sometimes get freaked out at the beginning, especially. “No way, I’ve got to write something for class on Twitter, that’s where the olds are, or somebody’s going to see it or Instagram, and my Instagram is about my cool sneakers, and now I’m going to have to start posting about class. People are going to think I'm nuts.” And I always encourage students first and foremost to create new accounts for us on both those platforms. But again, the number of times that we’ve actually had engagement from that public facing audience is so small. It’s so small.

This semester I’m really going to work at starting slow and maybe starting out of the gate with a walk and then moving to a jog and then run. Again, the metaphor is running, and maybe it’s a marathon. I’m not going to talk about assessment unless students ask, maybe until week four or later when we’ve done a number of different things that will create a better space, a space that maybe allows for more trust and safety in the learning community. An example of that is that I mentioned using Twitter and Instagram and discussion boards, and I use discussion boards for both video content every week and then also for written paragraphs. That means that I have students producing what I call low stakes assessment in four different spaces every week. And when I start the semester, it starts, boom, all four of those spaces, week one, and then you do that for the rest of the semester and the work becomes more difficult, then we read more and all that kind of stuff. But I think that’s a tough start for students.

And so what I’m going to do this semester is maybe start that first week with just a discussion post, and then maybe in the process I might throw some Twitter stuff or we might use Twitter in some way in the classroom that first week, but then only in the second week will I maybe ask them to tweet something, instead of asking them to both tweet and Instagram, which I normally do each and every week, starting from week one, I will just ask them to tweet first and then next week, in the third week, maybe we just do an Instagram post. And then maybe not until the

fourth week am I saying, “Okay, now I would like you to tweet an Instagram and maybe do a discussion post.” And then one of my discussion boards is what I call a human thread discussion. There I’m asking students, and these are often reflection questions, but I’m asking them to respond with a certain number of images across a certain timeframe in video format. One of the reasons why I think those videos provide some help is that they’re a human connection. You see your peers and you hear them in ways that are different from just seeing a paragraph written in a discussion board that’s kind of lame. So, the human, right, is a space for students to do that. I’m going to slow that process way down with the hopes that it becomes more effective and with the hopes that it creates a space of me doing something different so students can see that I’m interested in them and how we might learn together and what we might learn together and how we might share that. And in that space, create a space that’s more productive that will maybe create a different kind of energy. I think one of the complexities around academia is that on the one hand, it’s a linear hierarchal space of competition, and I have no interest in that. So, the fact that I don’t like that about education or higher education, that doesn’t immediately instill a shift in the energy of my classroom. It’s just a feeling that I have. I’ve got to figure out ways to do things that create a more collaborative, communal, transparent, and equitable space. That’s a big part of my goal as a teacher.

SW: I wanted to get your thoughts—given your current position as an instructor—about the challenges of being contingent faculty and the ways institutions can create more equitable systems that support teachers. To put it concisely, is there a potential for a more equitable future in higher education for contingent faculty?

BC: Yeah, those are great questions, Shane. And I’m willing to talk about the challenges of contingency faculty or precarity is another word that I use there. Contingency and precarity really are synonymous. I have to start by stating that my position as a full-time instructor is better than one of many adjunct positions. The difference there is full-time is a teaching load, in my case, four-four, a yearlong contract as opposed to a single class. And then there’s a whole range of different faculty who are in that space of adjunct and precarious and contingent faculty in the same category that I am. Again, even though mine is a little bit better because it’s yearlong, precarity and contingency faculty are terms that describe the growing number of faculty in higher education who are no longer hired under the auspices of rank and tenure. I’m just speaking broadly about the system, and this is observation really, and that’s important to keep in mind too, their working conditions. The working conditions of contingency faculty do not often require research in publication advising or service components, but they’re limited in terms often to a class or a single year contract. They’re teaching heavy and they’re paid less. An adjunct instructor teaching one class is contingent as an instructor with a full time one year contract. Again, there’s all kinds of posted between these conditions are getting worse and not better. This is an uncomfortable discussion and it’s a dangerous one, not only for me, but I think for so many of us. If asking questions and suggesting change is poorly received, people like me can lose their jobs. Indeed, the discomfort it creates is in large part why so many people refuse to participate in having it. I’m really grateful for you having that, asking that question and being willing to have that conversation.

Some observations in my department: there’s a growing majority of instructors as opposed to ranked faculty. We’re paid less than ranked faculty. We have one-year contracts with no research

and publication requirements, no advising, no committee work, and there's no structure for promotion or advancement. Sabbaticals are not available to us for ranked faculty. Teaching loads are roughly the same, although ranked faculty are teaching the bulk of the literature discipline courses, and they're likely to be teaching fewer classes. Ranked faculty are required to research and write and publish, and they're responsible for all advising and service or committee work. Those are some observations. This is my opinion. Our current system in higher ed is unsustainable and the ranked faculty will eventually be all but eliminated. People have written about the great resignation, and I have observed that as well. I see fewer and fewer faculty on campus be they ranked or contingent as the ranked faculty leave. New faculty are hired not as ranked faculty to replace them, but in lesser contingency positions. The division between these two pits faculty against each other, and it's divisive over time. The decline in tenured faculty in the department weakens not only the department are also the division. I work in the humanities, of course; this shows up in English departments and humanities divisions that are growing smaller in size, less powerful, involved in university work and operations, and there are fewer and fewer majors being offered. Those majors are getting cut. Faculty are disappearing; contingency faculty and gen ed teaching is replacing that.

If this is news to you, I recommend a recent piece by John Warner, "The Professors Who Refuse to Do the 'Free Work' Their Older Colleagues Did for Years." That's a bit of a mouthful. And Warner writes there, for example, and I quote, "The operational necessity of institutions chasing tuition revenue is fundamentally at odds with the purported mission of educating those students and producing new knowledge through faculty research." We can't ask institutions to produce a public good while structuring them like competitors in an increasingly intense marketplace. In broad terms, I'd like to suggest we rethink education outside of capitalism and move away from corporatizing higher ed. Another suggestion is Will Bunch's recently published *After the Ivory Tower Falls: How College Broke the American Dream and Blew Up Our Politics—and How to Fix It*. That's published by Harper Collins. Bunch's argument begins with the GI Bill. Legislation passed back in 1944 to get white US military veterans into college and then into careers. Black veterans and women were excluded from those benefits, and I mention this as a reminder of the way that race and gender are embroiled in legislation, in the system.

The systemic support of white men at the expense of others has been created largely by white men in government, but with the help of the voting populace over time. The complicated problem then of college and equitable systems for teachers is just that it's complicated. Generally speaking, people in humanities, languages, literature, mass communication here, they don't want to talk about our conditions. It feels like many above me—and again, these are observations, but maybe opinions too here—it feels like many above and around me are resigned to having no agency or say in the matter they feel like they can't talk or do anything about it. They have no choice in how the university is taking shape, and they're of the mind that higher education has just come to this. This is how it is, and I'll just stay here until I leave. I'll ride it out for the duration until I retire or leave.

You asked a really important question. Is there a potential for a more equitable future for contingency faculty in higher education, and do I feel there's a space for change and greater equity? I do see that happening, and I do have some hope. I see that happening in some institutions that are making systemic changes around the construction of the faculty and largely

what they call teaching faculty. I think—and I'm sharing my thoughts here—I think one of the fears of tenured faculty is the fear that something's going to be taken away from them in the process of change. Teaching faculty allows the university to leave tenured faculty as they are and to create new spaces for kinds of faculty with new job descriptions, new salaries, new benefits, and the like. I'm all for a reworking of job descriptions, job titles, work responsibilities, and salaries that are more equitable and transparent. I'm much less interested in the idea that we can and should go back to the way things were before. Bunch explores the right-wing attack on colleges and universities from the sixties to the present and the way things have been going for decades, if not in my entire life and maybe even a couple of centuries. We extend this above and beyond in the institute in the modern world, education in the modern world that has brought us here. That's why we're here. The pandemic across these last couple of years has laid that fragile and oppressive structure. I see the answer in change and something new.

I imagine, for example, that tenure will disappear in the near future, and while that's likely bad for the exchange of ideas in local communities, I think it's good for higher education and only if the new spaces for teaching faculty are more transparent, just and equitable for faculty. This devaluation of education has been happening for decades. I come from a family of public-school teachers. What brings me hope is us having this conversation right now, you and I, and then also more conversations like these. Are they happening at your institution? Are they happening in your department? Terry Gross asked Will Bunch this on NPR just the other day. How can people afford to pay $70,000 a year for four or more years so their son or daughter can go to college? That brings me hope, right? Honestly, I mean, if we just paid teachers like we paid doctors and lawyers and such, we'd be living in a much better world.

SW: Brooke, how would you encourage us to, one, embrace these conversations on precarity and labor and money in our local context, and then two, mobilize or do something about these issues? I'm thinking about action and what actionable steps we can take right now to better support faculty and students and higher education in the United States.

BC: Well, that's such a good question, Shane. Sometimes I think we as faculty are ill prepared to answer that, and I think that for a couple of reasons. One of which is for some of us we're experts in certain spaces and places, which is not the construction of an institute of higher education, and so we might not really have any ideas or thoughts or even desire to really say, "The system should be this, that, or the other, or we should do this, that, or the other." There are some faculty that their space is early modern English literature and Shakespeare in the stage, and they just want to do that. That's not me, for example. But there are people who do that, and I can understand that. I can certainly understand that for many of us, our areas of expertise lead us to great depths and to focus on trees, and the forest is not of any interest whatsoever, but I think there's all kinds of space for change and for improvement.

One of those is I think the sort of human thing that you brought up. We can acknowledge, and we can have those conversations, but then we can do things. I think these are just a few ideas. One of the things that I think is really important is being able to be seen and be heard to have a voice. There are a number of ways by which the idea of governance and the university is supposed to be or is based on this idea of shared governance, and so that involves things like maybe faculty senates, and there's all kinds of stuff and space there for places where people and

faculty in particular could be having these discussions. But it depends largely on faculty being able to have those discussions and identify and give people space for discussion and voice and place. That ranked system and the contingency faculty, that's divisive and doesn't help us in that place. It doesn't help us have those discussions. It's not inviting for people who don't have offices, who don't have a webpage space, a small space for a university, and I think this is actually a space of big difference. A place for all faculty to be listed in the department is important. If you're faculty in the department and your department looks like it only has ten ranked faculty and it's built with 30 contingency faculty, that inequity is wholly visible to those of us who are not offered space. That's not very effective for the students at that institution. It's not very effective for the staff at that institution. It's not very effective for the administration at that institution. That's not sustainable, in my opinion. So, there are small places and steps that we can take to I think be more human in this space, which is a good start.

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