

Episode 55: Bryna Siegel Finer

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Bryna Siegel Finer about basic writing, pedagogical development, program placement, and building more sustainable writing programs.

Bryna Siegel Finer is Professor of English and Director of Writing Across the Curriculum at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Her scholarship focuses on the rhetoric of health and medicine, basic writing, and first-year composition. Bryna is the co-editor of two collections, *Women's Health Advocacy* from Routledge, and *Writing Program Architecture: Thirty Cases for Reference and Research* from Utah State University Press. Her work has also appeared in *TETYC*, *Rhetoric Review*, *JWA*, and elsewhere. She is at work on a new project on rhetorics of support for breast cancer patients.

Bryna, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I want to start with questions about the basic writing classroom and basic writing programs. What are some common assumptions about the basic writing classroom?

BSF: I've been teaching basic writing for a very, very long time, doing a research project, collecting longitudinal data from nine basic writing instructors from across the country for the last two and a half years, and I've been spending the last couple of months analyzing that data.

In terms of common assumptions, I think that there's a myth or there's an assumption that the students who are placed in basic writing are unmotivated or they don't want to be there. And while I think sometimes that can be true, I think the reason for that has to really be explored, right, by whoever's teaching the class, by the people who do the placement, by the WPA. The students aren't necessarily unmotivated just because that is their intrinsic nature. But...being placed in basic writing comes with a lot of emotional stuff, it comes with a lot of...the students start to realize, "Oh wait, I was placed in this class, but my peers were placed in another class. Why didn't I get into this class?" Often, they're going to end up paying for a class, an additional class, that their peers aren't.

So there's a lot of stuff that comes with being put into basic writing, so it's not that the students have a character trait of being unmotivated. So that, I think, is a really important thing that people should not assume about the students. I think also that there's an assumption, maybe this is something, that anybody can teach this class. A lot of the people who I talked to in the research study that I've been doing have talked about how they see this happening at their own universities where a lot of adjunct or graduate students or contingent faculty teach basic writing

when they haven't had any training in it or any experience teaching it. And then, the students are kind of at a loss, right? They're not getting necessarily the best experience in the classroom.

I think that that's really a hard place for the students to be in. There are, of course, people, amazing instructors and adjuncts and graduate students who are great teachers, but I really think to teach this class, we talk about it at our own institution as a specialized course, you need some specialized training. You need to have some experience working with students and working with students who need additional support and have some training and the sort of pedagogy that goes along with that too. It's not like anybody can just sort of walk in and teach it.

SW: Can you talk more about your research project and the data you're collecting on basic writing teachers?

BSF: So I have nine different instructors who I've been interviewing and surveying. I started with...I interviewed them every semester for the last two years, and then they also did some surveys and I collected syllabi from them, some assignment sheets, a few different materials. They also wrote some reflections at various points during the two years.

So the reason that I started doing it was because I was thinking about who is the basic writing teacher, right? The people who I know who teach basic writing, when we talk about it, what we talk about is how it is a hard job. It is a hard class to teach and there are a lot of challenges, but yet every semester we ask to teach it again and again for years and years. So nobody is putting a gun to our head and saying, "You have to teach basic writing." We keep doing it.

That's what I was really interested in was who are these people who continue to do this. And so, part of what I'm sort of coding for right now is sort of like affect and emotion, kind of what feelings people express when they talk about basic writing and or their teaching. And so a lot of it is about sort of a shift from...a lot of them talk about sort of what I was talking about before, how you start with this frustration but you end with feeling kind of an exhilaration or excitement that you see student growth, that it's really noticeable in that class. I think there's a lot of satisfaction from that.

SW: So Bryna, I am also interested in knowing how you would suggest going about preparing someone to teach basic writing. What resources, texts, materials, or pedagogical strategies would you recommend?

BSF: What can best prepare somebody to teach basic writing is to be in the classroom with a teacher who's already doing it, with an experienced teacher. So either that they are assigned to be that person's graduate assistant or teaching assistant or something like that, or they ask if they can shadow that teacher. In some way they are in that classroom for once a week working as an in-class tutor, something like that. Spending time in an actual classroom.

A lot of us get our PhDs from institutions that don't teach basic writing, so they don't offer basic writing to undergraduates. So we get our PhDs in composition, rhetoric, or some related field, but we don't ever have the experience or the chance to teach basic writing. We teach something like English 101 and maybe some other kind of freshman writing course, and we might learn about basic writing. We might read some books about it or some articles, but we don't get that hands-on experience.

I was really lucky. I taught as an adjunct in some places before I did my PhD and I was kind of thrown into it and got a lot of practice doing it that way. But I think if you are a graduate student, if you can get some experience in the classroom, that's the best way. If you can't, I mean, there's a lot of great reading. Everybody will say, right, to read Mina Shaughnessy, read Mike Rose.

The Council of Basic Writing has a really great website blog kind of thing where people post tons of resources and articles and links to the journal. I mean, you really have to I think immerse yourself in that current scholarship, what's going on in that area if you're not able to get into the classroom itself.

SW: I find this idea of shadowing as a means for pedagogical development really fascinating. I imagine some teachers were thrown into English 101, maybe after a week of orientation or are teaching 101 while simultaneously taking a composition theory course. So what would you say makes basic writing an environment that maybe needs this kind of model or this shadowing approach versus teaching a class like English 101?

BSF: I think in basic writing what tends to happen is...like I was talking about before, there are the motivation issues, right? That you kind of need to uncover or unpack a little bit. And you have students who are really at a lot of different levels, right? I think you'd need to do a lot more differentiation, right? So working with students individually, grouping students and getting them to work together by kind of where they are, what they seem to be able to do at that moment, and trying to encourage growth.

There can sometimes be more resistance in basic writing classrooms. Students are kind of from the onset, not always happy about being in that class. I think it's useful to see an instructor handle that situation and handle that kind of throughout the semester. And also, I think it's really important to see how those students change over the semester.

Because in basic writing, you really do see growth, not only in writing, but in their sort of personalities, like how their attitudes kind of change. They might be really resistant at the beginning, but by the end they're really just kind of going with it and maybe even excited about it, they want to show you what they've written. I think it's really good to see that before you're actually the instructor of record because otherwise you go in and it's like, "Whoa, this is really hard and I might be really discouraged."

SW: I think what you're talking about, as well, are the variables in the basic writing classroom and the range of writers and learners that might be in that class just because of program placement practices and standards. Right?

BSF: I've run placement at our university for a lot of years, for several years, and what I realized is when we place essays, students, they either do a portfolio or an essay, most students do an essay. It's a timed essay, so most people are not writing their best, right, in a stressful situation when they're at orientation. I mean, we could do a whole other thing about placement, but just briefly, when we place them, it's usually pretty clear when a student has written a 101 essay, right? It's usually easy to see, okay, this is 101. This is fine, this student will be fine in 101.

It's all the 100s, that's our basic writing class, where it's just harder, right? We're just thinking, "Okay, well, so will basic writing benefit this student? Will they succeed in 101?" There's so much more conversation. The rubric is a lot more challenging. There's just so much more that goes into that. We're really thinking hard about this essay and this student and what's best for them. And then that's how they end up in the class—how you end up with a class of students with such variation in their writing ability.

SW: Your co-edited book, Writing Program Architecture: Thirty Cases for Reference and Research, talks about building and sustaining writing programs. So, writing centers, first-year writing programs, writing across the curriculum. What kinds of program challenges did you notice or what reoccurring themes stood out to you as you were working on this book?

BSF: Well, so when I started at IUP eight years ago, I was the Director of Liberal Studies English, which was basically what we call our first-year writing program. It includes a first year or a general education literature course, and also basic writing. I also started the Writing Across the Curriculum program. Each chapter in the book is divided into various sections, sort of parts of the architecture of each program. I mean, there's a budget section in each chapter. So every program talks about it, whether it's a writing across the curriculum program or a basic writing program, writing center. Everybody talks about this, right? That money is an issue.

There are a couple of programs that do talk about how they're very successfully endowed in some way, and so this has allowed them to really flourish, to succeed for the most part. That is really a challenge. And this book was published in, I think, 2017. So of course, it's only been more challenging, enrollment declining over the last few years.

What's kind of common through a lot of these is challenges with WPAs and various pieces of administration, right? So who you're reporting to, or other people...working with deans or working with provosts or working with department chairs, and those kinds of relationships are really important. So how successful the program can really be sort of depends on if you have a strong relationship with those people.

SW: Are there any solutions to those issues? I mean, like you said, I don't think there's a surplus of wealth at universities that is going to help budgets and meet real program needs and resources right now, but are there other opportunities programs can think about so that they can build a more sustainable future?

BSF: One thing that I almost managed to do this year was I was able to convince the provost, our provost, to redistribute money. There's no new money really, unless you're going to get some kind of donation, which does happen, but I was able to convince the provost to, using a lot of data, to stop paying for the standardized tests that our students were taking, the standardized writing test, showing him that the test was not really proving anything about our students' writing abilities and asked him instead to give that money to me for the WAC program. And he was totally on board, and I thought that was going to work out really well. At the last minute, they did stop paying for the test, at the last minute, most of that money went somewhere else.

You can make convincing arguments using data. The people at the top always want data that you could perhaps get money redistributed in your direction towards your writing program. I think also, and one way to do that really, especially with basic writing or in first-year writing, too, is if you have data that shows retention, right? That is what every university is all about right now. If you have data that can show how your first-year writing courses are helping to retain students, I would think that can buy you some money.

I think that actually the retention issue...one way I think that a WPA can be sort of successful in retaining good relationships with deans and provosts and chairs and people like that is by showing that you are interested, because you genuinely should be interested, in retention and student persistence and how the writing classes contribute to that mission at the university.

But also if you can show that you're collecting that kind of data that they need for those things, then it sort of shows them that you are on board with that, that you are interested in that, and that you are somebody they can turn to help with this problem.

SW: You use architecture as a metaphor in your co-edited book and argue that architecture is the new sustainability. How might you connect this metaphor to the basic writing classroom? What's the foundation, and the beams and posts, and what practical strategies do you use to help support your students?

BSF: I think that in basic writing what holds that class together is really about the relationship between the teacher and the students. That the teacher has to be really...has to start with building confidence in students. I think in terms of the foundation, that is that sort of trust and confidence building.

I hear constantly from my basic writing students that they have been told that they are bad writers, that they...yeah, I mean, that they're bad writers. I don't know what kind of person tells

somebody that. And how much they hate writing, which I think comes from...well, if somebody told me I was a bad writer, I would hate doing it, too.

I think that the more that their confidence is built up, that they have that foundation of trust, that they know that I'm going to support them, even though I'm going to challenge them. That if that foundation is there, then the rest...the skills and the content, right, those are like the beams and the posts that are building the class, those kind of come in on their own, right? But that foundation has to be really strong because I think some students in basic writing have had a really hard time with writing.

I mean, just something practical that is very easy, I mean, on the first day of class I'll have students do some writing, maybe just for 10 minutes, have just a simple prompt, and I respond to all of those by the next class period. And I always write...I start with, "Dear so-and-so." I pinpoint something that they wrote in there. "I really liked how you talked about whatever." One point and I will then always say something like, "I'm really looking forward to reading more of your work this semester. I can tell that it's going to be very exciting or interesting, or whatever." Something that I notice about this writing that they've done, even if it's two sentences.

I mean, I can say that I'm genuinely interested in working with them and reading their work and seeing more of their writing, and I sign my name so that they just have this little letter from me in those first couple of days that just says, "I want to work with you. I'm here." I think even that little bit helps. If they come to my office hours in the first week, so we can just sit down, they can come see me, I'm not standing up in front of the room, and they come in my office, they see pictures of my kid, they see his artwork, they see me as a little bit more of a human being, and we can have more of a...slightly more personal talk and learn a little bit more about them there.

SW: Thank you, Bryna. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.