

## Episode 127: Carl Whithaus

### *Transcript*

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

In this episode, Carl Whithaus talks about writing, assessment, writing technologies, online writing instruction, and trends and future directions in computers and composition research.

Carl Whithaus is a Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of California, Davis. He served as Director of the University Writing Program (UWP) from 2011-2018. He studies digital culture, writing in the disciplines (particularly communication in the sciences and engineering), and writing assessment. His books include *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), *Writing Across Distances and Disciplines: Research and Pedagogy in Distributed Learning* (Routledge, 2008) and *Teaching and Evaluating Writing in the Age of Computers and High-Stakes Testing* (Erlbaum, 2005). He is the co-editor for the *Journal of Writing Assessment*. On twitter, he's @carl\_whithaus.

Carl, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: You have a storied history of research and teaching in rhetoric and composition, and this history includes work in writing assessment, writing technologies, multimodal composition, technical writing, and writing in the disciplines. Can you talk about your journey to teaching and what led you to study rhetoric and composition?*

CW: Yeah, it's interesting. I think a lot of it has to do with CUNY, the City University of New York where I was doing my PhD work. Even before that, I did my masters at NYU. Strangely enough, I did my masters on histories of reading the Book of Job, so I mean sort of more traditional literature. But I was actually working with a faculty member in the Jewish Studies department, and I started graduate school, and I knew I was interested in writing technologies, but I wasn't sure if I was interested in the printing press, or in html. I liked both of those things. And I was reading across late medieval lit, early modern lit, and contemporary practices of using technology and also teaching. Of course, I found as I did coursework and as I taught at a variety of campuses around CUNY, my people, where I really belonged was with the rhet/comp folks and really with the students.

It's interesting, the focus on writing assessment, to move from being interested in writing technologies to writing assessment in the 1990s, ended up being a really organic move. It was an organic move within CUNY because CUNY at the time had a thing called the Writing Assessment Test, the WAT, and it was used to place students into basic writing courses or first year comp, but you actually had to pass it before you could move from being a sophomore to a junior or before you graduated from any of the CUNY community colleges. It was one of these timed one-shot exams. You sit down, you write to a prompt, and that was it. I was teaching both first year comp, but also the basic writing courses. What my students could do, because I would teach in the computer labs, they could produce so much in the computer labs when we had time, and yet they were having to take this pen and paper writing assessment and it hit on the writing technology stuff because I was teaching in computer labs, I could see what the students could

produce. Yet this thing that in some cases was preventing students from moving on to junior year at the community colleges was preventing them from graduating. That was supposed to be a placement exam but wasn't, and in some ways the injustice and inequality of that for my students who were failing those exams bothered me so much. I was like, "Okay, this is what I have to look at and start thinking about." Writing assessment as an area of research was really driven by thinking about and working with students in CUNY writing technology. I had been interested, but it was the zeitgeist of the time and there was such an applied way that it worked by thinking about its impacts on students' lives that I was like, "Okay, this is what I really need to look at is writing assessment systems, writing technologies, and then the way it impacts student lives."

*SW: Carl, research on writing technologies and writing assessment has grown so much since the 1990s and early 2000s. I'm wondering, have there been significant surprises or developments in those fields that stand out to you more than others given your early interest in this work?*

CW: I remember in the 1990s, the debates about should we even allow students to have grammar checkers. Remember green squiggly lines and red squiggly lines and all? I mean, it was the construct of writing, particularly for folks in psychometrics was writing was this sort of abstract thing. It didn't matter whether you were doing it pen and paper or on the computer. And in some ways, it's the old debates about calculators and high stakes math exams. It's funny, I felt that there was a number of us arguing for using common tools, making spell check, grammar check—and this is much more primitive than folks have now—available. That should be the environment. And in some ways, over the course of 25 years, that battle has been won and it feels like there's this strange moment where writing or at least word processing, that's the default now.

But I don't know if the larger shift that we folks have been arguing, how do you do situated writing assessment, really common tools where you use all the functions of multi-modality, how do you assess those things? I think in writing studies coming out of the portfolio movement and Kathy's work, we really have the knowledge of how to explain this is a good way to do writing assessment. But I don't know that that has not translated into things when there was the common core movement that was almost the opposite of really deep situated writing assessment. I guess I'm surprised in terms of how over the course of 20-25 years the debate about, "Oh, is writing pen and paper, is that the vehicle for doing it, or keyboarding? Can you do software assisted writing? That seems to have been solved in some ways, yet the fuller question of what does it mean to write with software, what does it mean in terms of multimodal writing? I don't know that writing assessment as a field, particularly when you get to large scale assessments, has grappled and fully understands even the implications of that yet.

*SW: Let's talk about online teaching. You've taught in hybrid and distant learning environments and you also served on the NCTE Best Practices for Online Writing Instruction Committee. What do we need to consider as we continue to develop online pedagogies and what strategies ought we take with us from online learning to face-to-face teaching?*

CW: Yeah, great question. I mean, what's interesting is I think even pre-pandemic, when we were all thinking about OWI as a thing, it was a very different moment than what happened with the pandemic. I mean, at UC Davis, we're very studious in terms of talking about what happened

during the pandemic as emergency remote writing instruction. My colleagues Corey Ching and Theresa Walsh really insist we weren't doing online writing instruction, we were doing emergency remote writing instruction. I mean, it's a different thing because we were all thrown into this environment. That being said, I think there were some best practices from OWI that could get picked up and probably are still with us. I mean, as we come to it, I think the notion of HyFlex is really interesting. And one of the people who's informed my thinking a lot about HyFlex is actually a person from San Francisco State.

Brian Beatty has some really interesting work around HyFlex. He comes more from the IT education technology side, but he really does a systemic approach of how you build high flex classes that meet student needs and how you have time to plan this. He's got a great book out that describes how a program could transition to the best models of HyFlex that really meet student needs. I think the trick though with HyFlex has been how do you actually do it? Well, when you're not under the emergency, Beatty recommends where you plan stuff out. You figure out how many in-class sessions you need to face-to-face sessions, you figure out how you make it more project based. I guess with thinking about OWI, I would break things down into two different ways. One, I would say, how do you do it programmatically to build sustainable, not just online writing instruction, but I would say HyFlex, blended and online? How do you look at the multiple ways you want to deliver curriculum and work with students? And Beatty provides that model.

Another person who's been really influential on my thinking is Jenae Cohn, who's at Sac State now, but moving to UC Berkeley. She's got this terrific book *Skim, Dive, Surface* about all sorts of strategies for how you have both online not only writing instruction but reading or analysis of material that's online. How do you build that into a class and how do you sequence it so that students get the most out of things? So, I guess for me it would be those two things. One is how, as a writing program administrator, do you think about building a sustainable program? How does the model of HyFlex help with that? And then the other is particular teaching strategies for online writing instruction, whether that's a fully online class or supplementing face-to-face.

*SW: Carl, what have you been paying attention to most recently involving computers and composition and what future directions would you like to see research take?*

*CW: I mean, this is both a little bit of a pivot away from just online writing instruction, although I think it speaks to how we teach and work in online environments. I'm working on a book that should come out from University of Pittsburgh Press, and the tentative title is *Swarms, Writing, and the Local*. It's really an attempt to look at how we have a rhetorical analysis that's really thinking about situations of writing, not just writing assessment, but writing, producing, communicating. How do we think and how do we teach students to think about writing in terms of multiple contexts, composing tools, relationships that writers have with each other as well as with the content that they're working with? How do they pick the samples that they want to analyze? And then what does it mean for writing to have an afterlife, the ongoing significance and impact of a piece of writing. Even if you look at a sort of model, that ongoing significance that things keep living after you've posted them, people come back to them, that feels like an important aspect.*

I think there's an interesting moment for computers and writing scholars not only to think about classroom environments, but to think about larger cultural debates. What's happening around information, misinformation, disinformation campaigns? How do we think about writing on Nextdoor, these local places of writing? Is there a way that we can develop rhetorical analysis, rhetorical participation techniques for students that speak to our moment in time in terms of personal civic as well as disciplinary engagement? That feels like a really important set of questions that I think we're working on and trying to figure out, one of the things in some ways related to engagement.

But really the Computers & Writing in 2023 is going to focus on the question of "to what end." It's really about hybridity, which both speaks to what we were talking about earlier in terms of HyFlex and different methods of teaching. I think hybrid is an important concept in terms of classroom activities. How are you developing particular activities? That I think is an important theme that will be out in the call for papers for the conference. But the other aspect of hybridity is some of these forms of mobile writing. What does it mean to have Nextdoor? What does it mean to have local Wikis? So not only classroom, but civic engagement forms of writing. Yeah, we're really looking forward to welcoming people to Davis in June 2023 and seeing what people propose around the theme of hybridity, but also the conference theme of to what end, which is not like, "Oh, we can just build it. Oh, it's cool, let's put these things online." But how does it contribute to access and equity and education? That's what the conference organizing committee is thinking about.

*SW: I want to go back to your scholarly interest in writing assessment and ask, what writing assessment practices or strategies are you most drawn to right now, and what does program assessment look like at UC Davis?*

CW: Yeah, so in this case, I think I'm going to do two shout outs to colleagues here at UC Davis who've done really interesting work. Trish Serviss, who's the director of our entry level writing program, has been doing a lot of work around placement and has developed a tool, the writing placement survey, which is sort of growing out of DSP, so directed self-placement, to have more informed placement based on students' high school experiences where they do a survey. What's really intriguing about both Trish's work, but also a bigger change within the UC system is during the pandemic, while there had been ten years of arguments in terms of moving away from what used to be the analytic writing placement exam, the WPE in the UC, which, actually, is not entirely unlike the WAD exam that I was telling you about at CUNY, a timed placement exam, although this one did involve readings. But Trish and people like Dan Gross down at UC Irvine successfully argued for a move away from the Analytic Writing Placement Exam. Some campuses may still use a variety version of it, but Davis, Irvine, Santa Barbara, a number of the campuses have moved towards using placement surveys. As instruments here for incoming students, placement surveys as an outgrowth of directed self-placement is a really cool thing.

Yeah, I research writing assessment, but as a writing program administrator, seeing that best practices come into play on my campus is a really exciting thing. And I also really appreciate the way that my colleagues are not just taking DSP and taking it off the shelf, but thinking about refining and changing DSP. There's really some interesting publications coming out about how we can use surveys, how we can actually put more of the directed or assisted into placement

rather than sort of a less informed choice, which I think might be tied with earlier versions of DSP.

I haven't said anything about contract grading, and contract grading has actually been really interesting both on the lower division level for us. So, first-year writing, and this is really Dan Melzer, the director of our first-year writing program has been encouraging graduate students to use contract grading, part of Dan's work. And then just part of larger conversations among the faculty and lecturers in the writing program at Davis has led more people to adopt contract grading or a version of a Asao Inoue's labor-based contract grading. I think we're seeing transformations both in first year composition, but then also in our upper division, writing in the sciences, writing in the professions classes where contract grading is allowing instructors to focus more on conversations that they want to have with students on what students want to produce and develop in their writing as opposed to a rubric and how students are meeting sort of preordained, "this is what you want to get" out of the course.

One little interesting thing about contract grading being implemented on a large scale in a writing program—I mean, where we're talking five to seven thousand students a year—it's interesting the way that in the first-year comp program, which is mostly taught by graduate students, contract grading has sort of been encouraged. Whereas for our faculty, it's also been encouraged, but it's much more of a conversation and in some ways an opt-in type of system. I would say out of our 70 faculty members, not all 70 have decided to do it. Maybe you have 30 or so people who are actually doing versions of contract grading. But among the whole faculty, the conversations that come out of thinking about contract grading are influencing people's assessment, but also really their responses and their pedagogy with student, even if they're not jumping in fully and saying, "Oh, I'm using a contract based grading approach." It shifts pedagogy and relationships that people have with students in really intriguing ways. It just reminds me a lot actually of Bob Broad's work, how faculty talk with each other and then talk with students. You sort of have this cultural aspect of writing assessment and then you have the technical. Are you using a contract based grading approach? Are you using a rubric, grade-based grading approach? Which one of those is driving things forward?

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