Episode 49: Carolyn Calhoon-Dillahunt
Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Carolyn Calhoon-Dillahunt about Yakima Valley College, a two-year college in Yakima, Washington, developmental writing courses, response to student writing, and the Two-Year College Association (TYCA).

Carolyn Calhoon-Dillahunt teaches English, primarily developmental and first-year writing, at Yakima Valley College in Washington State. Carolyn has been teaching at the community college for more than two decades. Prior to that, she taught middle school and high school. At Yakima Valley College, Carolyn is actively involved in her campus's equity initiatives. Her teaching and scholarly interests focus primarily on developmental and first-year writing and placement and assessment. Carolyn has served as TYCA Chair and CCCC Chair and has published pieces in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, *College Composition and Communication*, and *Writing Program Administration*, among others.

Carolyn, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I was hoping we could start by talking about your institutional context. Do you mind talking about Yakima Valley College and share a bit about what you teach?

CCD: Yakima Valley is kind of a unique context already, and so it's a two-year college and that's a unique context. But we're in a very agricultural area, yet Yakima itself is a city, there's a lot of drug abuse, there's all kinds of health issues that accompany poverty, there's mental health issues. And that's our community. So that's who is in the classroom. I'm from this area so I know this community well. Yakima is also heavily Latinx. The city is pretty much bi-cultural and the campus is about 60% Latinx population, so now for the past few years that has been the majority.

I've been there for 20 years and given this context, given that we're not a college-educated community on the whole, our students are often coming with pretty modest goals in mind, or maybe no goals in mind. They're coming because it seems like the right thing to do and they're coming to transform their lives, whatever that means for them. You kind of teach writing with that in mind, so it's not really about your content first, it's about your people that you're working with and what they're going to need to be able to move wherever they choose to move. And you want to kind of prepare them to move because many times they start with very modest goals and then they realize they have brains and it's like, "Oh, you mean, I could go to a four-year college?" And they get really interested because many of them had impoverished K-12 educations. So once they get some really good challenging education, many of them like it and want to continue and feel really inspired.

So you also want to set them up for the career goals they have, if they want to get right out there, you want them to be able to do that and do that effectively, but you also want to kind of keep pathways open for them so that they're able to do things that they hadn't imagined that they'd be able to do before.

My college has two developmental writing courses prior to English 101 or first-year writing, and because we're on the quarter system, our writing course is a two quarter sequence. So the first one is just basically academic writing, introduction to academic writing and using source-based writing. And the second one is a little bit more...well it's called argumentation. So it's a little bit more research and a little bit more taking a clear position. And so that's kind of the span of composition courses. All of us teach composition primarily, there are very few literature offerings or creative writing offerings or things like that, at most I probably teach one a year. So really, it's composition and that's the whole department, we're all compositionist, even though an increasing number are trained in composition, that's not the majority. So most folks are coming from not writing instruction, writing theory backgrounds, as they come into this.

That said, it's a really good and collaborative department. So we have a really good sequence, I'm very proud of our sequence, it sets students up to move through and kind of just keep rebuilding on these skills, it really sees writing as a developmental process and is built in that way. I generally teach...I was going to say about half developmental writing and half college level writing. I think it's leaning a little bit more towards more college level writing at this point because we've changed our placement tool in the past few years, I was pretty integrally involved in that and more students were placing into 101 as a result. So that's a happy outcome, though, I am sad because developmental writing are my favorite classes to teach. So there's fewer of them, but that's what I generally teach when I can. I also do some advanced comp courses, so I teach research writing pretty regularly. Usually once a year, a colleague and I do a collaborative, developmental reading, developmental writing course, I do the developmental reading portion of it.

SW: So you teach a wide range of writing classes from developmental writing to a more argument centered writing class. What's your approach to teaching these different writing classes?

CCD: It's not that different from developmental to college level. So our entire department has adopted a process oriented approach, and so we see writing as a recursive process and the graded writing is always stuff that have gone through revision and feedback processes along the way. In developmental writing courses, I tend to use portfolios to allow more time for the process before grading is involved. For the past four or five years, I've adopted kind of Asao's model of contract grading. Our developmental writing courses also don't have grades, letter grades, they have "satisfactory" if they're ready to move on to the next level; "credit" if they've completed most of the coursework, but haven't met the course outcomes; and "no credits" would be like if they haven't achieved that.

I teach in a quarter system so we don't have a lot of time. So most classes I'm usually doing probably two to three major writing projects and a lot of other writing. I integrate reading in everything I do, though, much more fully when I have that linked reading class where I can actually concentrate on that.

I'm interested in teaching for transfer. I can't say that we've adopted that as a department, but I try to integrate aspects of that where I'm doing a lot of metacognitive work with the writing and trying to really make explicit core concepts and the core abilities that they're learning in these areas and the ways that they're applying to other things. I'd say one of the things outside of composition that has really informed my practice in the past probably three or four years now is our college has adopted an equity agenda, which means different things to different people. But I am on that bandwagon and even though administration may not see equity in quite the same way or they're learners on this, I am happy to be there to shape this conversation and to be a part of this conversation.

Part of that is we've received many Title V grants as an Hispanic Serving Institution. And with one of the more recent grants we received, it was really devoted to faculty professional development across the disciplines. We adopted a program at the time called ESCALA and it's a consulting organization that does engaged learning for Hispanic Serving Institutions. It doesn't matter if it's two-year college level or four-year college level. So this program involves going through workshops to kind of learn some key concepts about equity and about teaching minoritized populations. It focuses on, it kind of has a ladder with three prongs and it has the idea of…relationships is one of the key aspects of engaging students in learning, building competence is another one and building trust. Then, that's part of the assessment system, too…is having an assessment system that's trustworthy.

And so these are things that I felt like I was already practicing, but it's really helped me to be more conscious, more intentional with my planning, more explicit and transparent with students about what I'm meaning. I think it's been a really healthy, positive change for me and for the faculty involved at this point across the disciplines. About half of the faculty in arts and sciences have participated in this program. So it involves the workshops, it involves doing some sort of classroom-based research project, just for a quarter, so it's not very in-depth. But looking at some problem that you want to address in the class, that's related to issues that you've been learning about in the workshops and applying some intervention and then studying how that intervention works. I've really appreciated that reflective practice. And this is what I ask students to do. So I'm happy to engage in the same sort of thing.

SW: You mentioned that you love teaching developmental writing. What excites you about this class, or what do you enjoy the most about teaching developmental writing?

CCD: I love the students, first and foremost. I love them because more than any other group, I think they are there to transform their lives, whatever that means to them. And they feel very invested and they feel very grateful for their education and that's easy to work with, and they're

with you, right? So they're very engaged in learning, they're less kind of "point oriented." When I teach, especially when I teach in the fall and have a bunch of new students or a bunch of young running start students, that's our high school in the college classroom, and they come to the college classroom in our state primarily, and they're just like, "How many points is this worth?" They're totally concerned about this.

I don't get that at all with the developmental writers. They're just kind of like, "Here I am, I feel like I'm in the right place. And I want to learn things." So they want to learn. For me, grading contract writing has been no sweat. They they're like, "All right." They are not really concerned...so we really can all focus on learning and focus on here's what the course outcomes are. My commentary is better in those classes because it does feel less pressured without a particular grade that I have to assign at the end. 100% of them could be satisfactory, I would love that, that would be my goal. It's not really a gatekeeping sort of class, but it is, it still does prevent them sometimes from moving onto college level, even though there's not a test or whatever that they have to pass at the end, but they seem really focused on learning. When students are focused on learning, that's where I'm the happiest, because that's kind of what I'm there for. We don't have to do all the, I call it "point grubbing." We don't have to do all this, where we're kind of distracted from what we're really doing here, because we're so concerned about what the final grade outcome will look like.

There's just a lot of freedom and flexibility too in developmental writing courses. Our campus actually has a lot of freedom. We don't have a standardized curriculum at all, we just have standard outcomes and I think that works really well for who we are, predominantly full-time, which is rare at a two-year college. We have developed collaboratively our course outcomes, so we all have a clear sense of what we're looking for. We've done a lot of assessment. Everyone feels pretty comfortable doing what works well for you as a teacher, where your strengths are as a teacher, where your interests are as a teacher.

SW: I want to talk about your co-written article "Conversing in Marginal Spaces: Developmental Writers' Responses to Teacher Comments." This is a study on developmental writers' perception and attitudes on teacher response. But not just perception. Really, it's about action – it's a look into what developmental writers do when they receive feedback from teachers. What did you learn from studying students' reactions to marginal comments, and how has this research helped shape your teaching or helped shape your responses to student writing?

CCD: That's probably one of the most enjoyable for sure and best learning experiences that I engaged with…collaborating on that project with Dodie. This was actually a three-year project that we did. The article only represents the first year. I'm trying to think if we pulled in some of the stuff from the second year, we might've. But it doesn't represent the third year, which was my favorite. And we started writing on that and just various things happened. I was elected to C's and that kind of consumed all my time. We had parents with health issues and so it just didn't get going. And then by that time, I don't know…it just became clear that it's like, this is getting

pretty old, probably going to have to put this to bed. I can't even remember it well enough, but the third project was actually case studies and that was awesome.

So Dodie, I used her class. I interviewed, I think we had five or six students out of her class and we kind of went through that whole process that we did with the study, but just with those students and then follow up interviews with them and it confirmed what we were seeing. It also provided a lot more support for the most part of the autonomous nature that these students are bringing in. Again, we still have these assumptions that developmental students...and they're not wrong, there's support for this, that developmental students want directive feedback and want to be told what to do, but they really do want to intellectualize...the majority of them, like most any other student, they're just students, they're just writers, they're just earlier more novice writers.

I think that was really helpful to try to get rid of that bias that I think I had and didn't intend to have because I love teaching developmental students, but I was maybe being a little bit too nurturing, like, maybe this is my K-12 where I'm trying to show them the right way versus kind of treating them as they are adults with perfectly capable brains, and plenty of ideas, and just maybe need more practice at academic forms. It was great to work with another colleague and to kind of share these experiences back and forth. It was great to talk to students, even when it wasn't direct, we did interviews with the students, even in the first round, but you're getting to know them on the page pretty well and how forthright they are and how much they're willing to share about their experiences.

It was mostly very heartening to understand that our hunch that we felt like commentary was important, both she and I devote far too much time to it. I haven't gotten any better, I get more efficient, but I'm slower. So it hasn't been a time-saver at all. That's just like, it's still a hugely time-consuming process, but you're hoping that it makes a difference and our study suggested that it does. But when you engage in it with this opportunity to discuss things with them on the page, that's what they're taking it as, that's what they want, that is how they are maturing, even though... I think back to very early in my career teaching, I implemented portfolios, that's something I even did in grad school. I loved that idea of just having them revise and make some choices, but what I remember is I would look at portfolios and all this stuff that I remembered had so much potential. And then I'd look at it and I'd be like so disappointed because it didn't live up to this potential that I had in my mind.

I think the study really brought home that 1) I'm taking ownership of their paper when I'm doing that, I'm imagining what it can be, and 2) I wasn't always being fair because I had imagined what their paper could be and it wasn't that they weren't passing, it was still satisfied, still credit…it was just like, it's not as good as I thought it could be. Like they were making changes. I'm just not seeing them because they weren't the changes that I was telling them to make necessarily, or they weren't changing in the way I thought they should change. So it's humbling and it's good, it's good.

And then to really think that the point is not to create a great paper. That'd be great if we both agreed and we're both really thrilled and proud of this work. But the point is to learn how to change your writing and to learn how to make decisions about it. And to make those decisions and to have a reason why you made those decisions.

So it really helped me appreciate that there's a logic behind what they're doing. A lot of times you're not asking them about that logic. If we took a moment to ask them about that logic, it really does change your commentary. So it's like, when they tell you why they're doing the things they're doing, sometimes it's totally the wrong thing to do. Like it's really not the best or appropriate response, but then it's like, "Oh, okay, you were thinking that would do this, but as a reader, it did not do that. So what if..." And it's far more empowering and it's treating them far more as writers, you're responding to them as workers doing this stuff, not to this piece that you imagine is going to be some way.

And so, even though I didn't feel like I was doing that, I think the study really brought home, that we all have the tendency to do that, we were definitely doing that. We could see our colleagues doing that as we were studying them. And students are making a lot of effort and that effort's not always helping the product the way teachers think are successful, but it doesn't mean that it's not still a really worthwhile thing for them to go through revision. When we asked students to do something, especially reconceiving, not only do they not necessarily have the practice or skillset to do that effectively yet, they just may not have the time, even if they wanted to. It's just like this is a big task, when you ask somebody to just reconsider something completely, that's the hardest thing you can do. So I think it also kind of helped us to moderate our expectations of what can a student really realistically do with something, what should a student really realistically do with something when this is just a thing for a class that's getting them to practice a learning outcome. And so yes, all very humbling and very instructive.

SW: You're such a reflective teacher, and one thing I admire about your teaching is that you build in time for students to reflect on your comments. You have them fill out a reflective report on your feedback. It's so important to better understand how students are responding to our comments. That means we also have to understand who our students are and where they are. For example, that means, in part, understanding who is working 40+ hours per week, raising a family, taking night classes. Students' affordances to time and their relationship with time and their abilities to revise and labor aren't all equal.

CCD: I'll give an example from last quarter in developmental English, which was again, just really eye opening. And so this is not a graded course, this is all contract, labor-based contract. It's set up for success, I want them to be a 100% successful, but they do need to do the work and I recognized they were evening students, they have even less time, they do have families, they do have full-time jobs, all kinds of them, had traumas that occurred during the quarter.

So this particular woman, very high achieving, very skilled. For her first one, it was just like a personal reflection. They were supposed to reflect on a photo and tell the story behind it and then

analyze what's going on there and what maybe they observed now that they didn't observe at the time. And so she had a very powerful story and there were just a few places where I didn't know the details and I knew she was trying not to delve very far into them, but it was just like, "I might need a little more information here." So this all went well.

Next essay comes in and it's also very good. She's very good at crafting it, it was supposed to be a profile essay, so I wanted kind of one trait to come up about this person and I got like everything, she's just basically an angel walking on this earth. And so I said, "That's awesome, that she's an angel walking on this earth, but for this paper..." Because it was also super long. I was like, "Maybe you could just focus in on one of her angelic qualities and just exemplify that."

So I give it back to them electronically, but she comes to class, she was already late and she's in tears when I get to her. I am not sure if that's about my commentary, but I suspect it might be. I asked if she wants to talk or anything...and she does not. I let her go and then I email her after she leaves and I was just like, "I know a lot of things are stressing you out and upsetting you right now. But I feel like my commentary was one of them. So is there something that I can talk about?" And she just felt like such a failure. And then I'm like reading back my comments, and I was like, "What did I say? How could I crush her spirits?" The thing is, I think just because I had more suggestions because it was still highly praising, I already told her that it totally accomplished all the course outcomes.

So I just had to tell her, "You just got to let this go. Just don't revise it, ignore everything I said." Because that's not the intent and if you can't revise this piece, if it's giving you that sort of anxiety, there's no need, just put it aside. You don't have to do anything. It was already satisfactory. I should treat students like writers, but she's still a student. And so I was talking to her like a fellow writer and I was offering her commentary like she had that experience and maturity to address these things. But it was just overwhelming, even though as I look at it, it's not overwhelming and it's not negative, but it's like, so I need to treat them as writers, but they're still students. And that was a good lesson for me, too, because I think I erred on treating her like she was a colleague, because she was my age. So it's just like, she felt like a colleague, she's very skilled, but it's like, she's not, she's still a vulnerable student with all these student stresses.

SW: In 2019, the Two-Year College Association (TYCA) held its first national conference. I see this as a huge step forward in supporting teachers in two-year colleges, a step forward in increasing visibility on two-year college work, and a step forward in developing collaborations among teachers of writing. What sort of feedback did you hear from attendees and what future impact do you think this conference will have on our field?

CCD: This is one of the questions I read before, and at the moment I wasn't sure how to answer because I didn't get to be at the TYCA conference. I got to go to the luncheon, but I had some C's meetings that day. However, I have a lot of ins with TYCA. So I was definitely well aware of what was going on, I got to review proposals.

I went back and I looked at my chair's reflection and that's kind of where the idea of maturing is coming along. So at the time…I think that was 2014 when I wrote that. I was reflecting on where TYCA was, it had just celebrated 15 years of being a national organization, though, 40 being a regional organization and a journal at the time. I was like, it really is entering its adolescence in a lot of ways. And so it definitely is bringing out more voice. By 2014 there was a stronger sense of voice, a stronger sense of autonomy, a sense of who we were as an organization, but still very fledgling, right? Because as a national organization, we're still a collective of regionals and there wasn't a real strong national identity and it doesn't always overlap completely. That's still an issue today, but at the time, so during my tenure, for our 15th birthday, we had done the tour of TYCA, which was kind of an effort to pull sessions from the regional conferences into a virtual environment, two week rollout where we featured regions and then it was archived. And it wasn't huge participatory thing because it was asynchronous, things often are not, but it was kind of this first recognition that you need that kind of conference space. You need this sort of presentational space beyond the journal to feel like you're an organization.

And before my time, and during my time there had been some talk about not a national conference like this, but some sort of meeting on Wednesday, there were all these ideas and then to watch it and just a few short years kind of grow into like, this is a really grownup thing to do. This is really a mature thing for an organization to do, and it's hard to pull off, but to establish an organization, to have this body of professionals and to have this body of scholarship represented in this space, this is amazing. I heard very good feedback. I went to the luncheon speaker and he was incredible.

I really see it as representative of a maturing organization that's developing an identity on its own. I looked back to at the time...so TYCA had a 2020 vision and I see that they've extended the date on it, but looking back at what we had hoped to achieve 10 years in the future and some of it we have, and some of it we haven't. The vision statements are aspirational, you're trying to get there. It wasn't about a national conference, so it certainly was about using TYCA the organization as a way to professionalize and provide professional development resources for folks in the two-year college. I definitely think that this was a huge step in achieving that goal.

Another aspect of it was, of course, policy. I think there should always be a space for two-year colleges in policy discussions. I look at how our position statements have matured over the years as well. Excellent white papers that have been done, especially on developmental education. I think there's some pretty great scholars that are finally finding venues for their voices to be heard and places where people can kind of go, "Oh, two-year colleges are producing stuff as well."

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