

Episode 81: Cheryl Hogue Smith

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Cheryl Hogue Smith about teaching at Kingsborough Community College, first-year writing classroom practices, teaching basic writing, the importance of reading, and multimodal assignments.

Cheryl Hogue Smith is a Professor of English and Writing Across the Curriculum Co-Coordinator at Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York and a Past Chair of the Two-Year College English Association. She is a Fellow of the National Writing Project (SCWriP) and has published articles in *TETYC*, *JBW*, *JAAL*, *English Journal*, *JTW*, *California English*, and *Midsummer Magazine* (Utah Shakespeare Festival) and chapters in *What is "College-Level" Writing?* (vol.2, NCTE) and the forthcoming *Deep Reading, Deep Learning*.

SW: You teach at Kingsborough Community College. Do you mind talking more about what it's like to teach writing at a public community college in Brooklyn, New York? What are some of your goals in teaching first-year writing?

CHS: Sure. So, Kingsborough is actually part of the City University of New York system. It's one of seven community colleges, so it's a little different than a standalone community college that's just affiliated with one university. We do have the same sort of requirements as the other university or the other colleges, but teaching in Brooklyn, we're the only community college in Brooklyn. And someone told me that Brooklyn would be like the fourth or fifth largest city if it were on its own, and we're the only community college in Brooklyn. So it is very diverse, extraordinarily diverse. 71% earn lower than \$30,000, 49% first generation, 89% live with their family. Most of my students for first-year comp are entering freshmen. My first-year comp classes are in learning communities. So, I teach alongside an art historian and then we have a sort of like a student success class where that person who teaches it is also the student's advisor for a year.

I think to be in this program, they have to be entering freshmen. I have an entire class full of brand spanking new college students. So, that took a little bit of time to get used to, for me, because you're used to people coming up through a developmental sequence. So you have people who know how to do college with people who don't, and so they sort of teach each other well, they're all learning how to do college at the same time. But I love teaching in a learning community. It just makes everything just so much better. I love particularly the art history one. So, almost everything I do, has something to do with that learning community, everything that I write about. And so, the students, they are full-time students, working full-time, and traveling between one and two hours one way by public transportation. Yeah, so they are extraordinarily busy, just everything you would possibly imagine from community college students.

Okay, so my goals in teaching, what are my goals in first year teaching...to help students understand that writing is as much about reading as it is about writing, that if they have trouble understanding a text it's because that text is hard, not because they're deficient as readers. The

confusion and frustration are part of the reading and writing processes and questions are their academic best friends, that their interpretations of texts are valued and important, that they're capable of doing whatever they put their minds to, and often they've been told otherwise.

If I can get students to learn any of that, then I think they'll be a little less afraid of failure. They often do come to me, just really afraid that they're going to fail. So, if I can help them understand more about the learning process and just get a victory here and there, then they'll know that they can succeed again. I just need them to get some victories so that they know that they can do it. And that's really sort of like my goal of what I'm trying to do. And then I have, of course, the things you try to do in your classes. I mean, I want them to learn how to synthesize texts and develop and organize and be clear, that kind of thing.

SW: Cheryl, you're talking about the expectations and experiences students have given your institutional context at Kingsborough Community College. You mentioned maybe this underlying fear of failure that students have. How do you talk about failure with students? Or how do you create a space that supports students? Or that makes them feel comfortable in the writing classroom?

CHS: Yeah, I think I never talk about failure. I never talk about any of that. I mean, I don't want to even broach the subject, but on the first day of class, I tell them that I hope that they're perpetually confused, right? Cause if they're confused then they're learning. And we talk a lot, a lot about how when they're reading something, I want them to talk about what they don't understand, not what they do. I mean, of course, they're going to talk about that too, but I want them to focus on what they don't understand. Let's look at that because if you don't understand something, that's going to be interesting and that's where all of the really good ideas come from. So, I focus on what they don't understand. We talk a lot about being confused. We talk a lot about being frustrated and we talk a lot about asking questions, that questions are the thing that you want to ask.

And I do a lot of group work. One of the strategies that I use is just putting them together and going through an exercise where they have to read something, write down their answer and then read their answer aloud to each other before they can discuss, so that they get used to hearing multiple interpretations and understanding that it's not necessarily a matter of "wrongness" if you read something, right? It's not about right and wrong answers, it's about different interpretations, seeing the world differently, that kind of thing. Really just getting them comfortable with uncertainty and comfortable with confusion, it just sort of happens that they then start to recognize it's a safe place to just throw your ideas out there, even if someone disagrees with you, sometimes that's the best conversation to have.

SW: So you're talking about the importance of collaboration. You're teaching and research includes peer review and basic writing. You published an article in 2015 titled, "Basic Writers as Critical Readers: The Art of Online Peer Review." In this article, you start by talking about the complicated history of peer review, how writing teachers see peer review as meaningful and valuable, even though there are some potential drawbacks, like the tendency for peers to focus on grammar and error and other surface level concerns as opposed to content. Can you talk

about your motivation for this research and how teachers teaching basic writing ought to reconsider or reimagine peer review or what peer review does?

CHS: You know, it's funny, it's both magnified and it's not magnified. I listened to your podcast with Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt, who just brilliantly talked about how developmental students, they're not...what did she call them? Point counters or something like that. Where it's like, "How many points do I get?" That kind of thing. Developmental students really come in and they're like, "Okay, I'm here to learn." Just, they soak it up. So, yes, I think maybe the fear of failure sometimes is more magnified in them because often they "failed doing," as Darin [Jensen] says. Scary quotes, right? They failed into your class, and so they're already there because of that, but they just soak everything up.

I started doing peer...I have a love, hate relationship with peer review. I really, really, really hate it. I can't tell you how much I loathe it, but because I don't think it's effective or at least it wasn't, and so, I started thinking about why I hated it so much. I still did it, really more of a just bring your stuff in and put them in groups while you work the room, you do that, like down and dirty, like let's see what you're doing. I was using it as sort of like a way to get them, to bring a draft in, so that I can then give them something to do. But I always tried to give it where it was more meaningful where they could not focus on the grammar. I mean, it's like some of them think that they know everything anyway and it's like...

But then I started paying attention to them and watching how they weren't really doing their own work. They were more focused on who was grading or who was commenting on their paper. I started realizing that if I could do this anonymously, then they wouldn't know who's marking on their paper and they wouldn't know whose paper they're marking. So, if I'm Cheryl Smith sitting in this classroom and I see that Shane Wood is so smart, he is just so smart, I just really think that he's just so intelligent. I have his paper in front of me, I don't need to do anything cause I know he's smart, right? Same token. Shane gave me my paper back and I'm like, "Oh, I have to do everything that he told me to do because it's from Shane." And so, I wanted them to be more discerning about the comments that they were getting and to do that they couldn't know who they came from; I wanted them to be more discerning about the comments that they made and they couldn't know whose paper they were doing.

I also have a lot of really slow readers. I say that with great respect, because I swear to you, I'm probably the slowest reader in the whole room, but I didn't want them to be focused on how long it was taking them to do it. So, I put it online and because of that, I had the luxury of time, they had the luxury of time, and they had no idea whose paper they were doing, and they could only look at the paper as it was written to a specific prompt. And so, what they're doing, I guess I should say that I'm treating it as more of a reading exercise than a writing exercise. I actually don't even really pay attention that much to the kind of feedback they're getting, because what I want them to do is see someone's interpretation of the text I assigned that they're writing about, but also to get better at just reading student work.

And so, then when they get their comments back to really pay attention to those comments and decide, "Is this something I want to do?" I don't want them doing anything blindly. I want them to get used to, "I need to think about this particular thing. Am I going to do it? Why am I going

to do it or am I not going to do it? And why am I not going to do it?" And it just became so much more rich as soon as I stopped treating it like a writing exercise and started treating it like a reading exercise. Game changer, right? Because really what it is, it's getting them two different ways of critical reading, reading the student text and the reading of the student's interpretation of another text. That's pretty much what I was writing about.

SW: This also makes me think of another thread in your teaching and research, which is critical reading. Can you talk about how you teach reading in first-year writing at Kingsborough Community College? And could you share strategies you use to cultivate, foster, center reading in the writing classroom?

CHS: They never lose sight of the fact that my class is as much about reading as it is about writing. It has to be. And we talk about it all the time, that you are writing about what you are reading. I often tell them you can't out write your reading ability. So we've got to work on critical reading and not only of the text of others, but of texts of your own making. It's really hard to really get them to do all of the things we want them to do. We want them to read with a focused attention that allows them to negotiate meaning with texts. We want them to understand that all texts, including their own, are open to warranted multiple interpretations. We want them to understand that rereading is key to analyzing all texts. We want them to monitor their thinking as their reading texts. We want them to trust the value of their own ideas, so that they don't feel like they need to parrot someone else's ideas. And we want them to understand confusion is a necessary part of the process.

So to do that, in an in-person world, I do that interrogating texts, it's the exercise where they are just constantly focusing on the questions, focusing on what confuses them, trying to figure out all the different interpretations that are coming from their group members, but that doesn't translate well into an online world, I discovered. So now, I do something kind of similar, but I'm doing it from...one of my colleagues, Matthew Gartner, does like a Google Doc, and he puts text in it, and he has them respond to it in certain ways. I totally ripped off that idea, but still sticking with the things that I want them to do, digging in, focusing, rereading, rereading, rereading, and really focusing on what they don't understand and then trying to answer it.

It's not just enough to answer the question or ask the question. They also have to try to come up with what they think might be a plausible answer or interpretation. I make sure that they always understand that this isn't about right or wrong answers. I do not want them mining texts, trying to figure out what it is. I think...for them to figure out what they think I think they want, that's really hard for them to get out of their system. I choose texts that don't really have right or wrong answers, they can have multiple interpretations. The art link [in the learning community] helps a lot because we look at visuals a lot, the first exercise or the first paper that I have is protest art versus propaganda, so they have to find a piece of protest art and determine why it would be effective for the protest and why people would be against it, right? Why people would say that's just mere propaganda in the negative sense of the word.

That gives them two ways that they have to look at something. So, that visual rhetorics and looking at, analyzing an image, and then using texts and trying to talk about analyzing that image, it just really is, pulls everything together. And so again, rereading the Google Doc thing

from that I ripped off from Matthew, just so super easy and useful. It also lets me know, because CUNY, the City University of New York, has a policy where students don't have to turn on their cameras, so I teach to myself because no one has their camera on. So, the Zoom, you have it on, you're like looking at yourself and you're like pretending like you're having a conversation.

And so, what happens is sometimes they're at work, sometimes they're not there, and so it gets them actually participating in this. They know that my class is going to be one where they're going to have to do something. And so...it does keep their participation and it keeps them reading, reading, reading, reading, and writing about what they're reading all the way through. Then, they have access to these documents too, and they can use each other as text sources in their papers, if they so choose. So, it's like building all the way through and just showing them the value of writing about reading, because really that's what college is all about. You're writing about what you're learning, you're writing about what your teachers think you should be reading for their classes.

SW: So, you've written about incorporating multimodal assignments in the writing classroom. What do you think are some of the affordances of embracing multimodality and drawing on a multimodal approach to teaching writing within the larger context of two-year colleges, and then even more specifically the affordances of multimodality given your specific geographic context in Brooklyn, New York at Kingsborough Community College?

CHS: I could talk about this for like hours. So, okay, I'm going to tell you a little story. In this learning community, one of the assignments that we had to do that came from the student success class was a diversity sort of project. And we'd gone through so many iterations of it where they were just writing an essay or watching that short clip of the woman. Gosh, I think it was in the 70s, who told everybody, if you have blue eyes, you're good; and if you have brown eyes...I don't know if you've seen that, if not, it's terrific. But anyway, nothing worked. It was just, they hated it. We hated it. I saw a presentation in California, from Amanda Reyes and Ron Ferrell, and they were doing something at Dominguez Hills, where they were sending their students off onto the campus.

As soon as I saw that presentation, I thought, my students live all over New York City, right? So Brooklyn, Queens, Bronx, Manhattan, Staten Island, New York City, there's art everywhere. What if that diversity assignment ended up being, go into your neighborhoods and take photos and create this multimodal project, which is what Reyes and Ferrell had done. Create this multimodal project, and the only rule is that it has to have images, text, which doesn't necessarily have to be written, it could be oral. And the prompt was how does the art influence the diversity of the neighborhood? And how does the diversity of the neighborhood influence the art? I didn't know anything about PowerPoint. We all learned it together. Best assignments I've ever seen.

There was one student in there who didn't really speak very much, and her, we called it, the "walkabout," her walkabout was one of the best things I've ever seen. We did it toward the end of the semester and she did not have a final paper. I know that because she would sit in front of a blank computer screen when we were in the computer lab and she ended up turning in a paper that was good enough to get a C. She was using sort of like the same rhetorical moves that she had done in the walkabout that she did with this final paper. So, I started thinking about that, I'm

like, “Why are these so good? Why are these so good?” The struggling students are surpassing in execution. These multimodal assignments, surpassing the students who were doing really well on the traditional assignments.

About a year later, still doing something like that, but I was talking to a friend of mine, who did not do well in traditional school, but is so super creative. She ended up going to the Fashion Institute of Technology for Film Studies, and we were talking one day and she said, “I love my classes. I can do the projects however I want to do.” So struggles out of high school, and is making a 4.0 GPA at FIT. It got me thinking, that's it, community college students sometimes don't do well in traditional school, but they're so creative. This is actually, I think, why they loved the images, they loved doing the music, and the musical choices are just make everything, I mean, it's beautifully done. Just the way that they manipulate PowerPoint and make it work. I do something very similar where I start with the protest art and then I end with them researching just a single artist who has made an impact on the art world and society as a whole, that kind of thing. That's my last assignment.

The middle assignment is a one-page flyer. It's a one-page flyer getting them ready for that last, because one of the hardest things to teach students, and you know this, is getting them to synthesize texts, right? You have to use like four or five articles, whatever, and not have them say, “Article one says this in this paragraph, and then article two says this.” Right? But getting them to actually understand how those texts talk together. So, this one-page flyer, they have to have categories about this artist, like the medium, the impact on the art world, the impact on society as a whole, and they have to use at least three sources, in all of these categories, and get it onto a one-page flyer. And that sets them up for the narrative of the final project.

I did the flyer once. Phenomenal, phenomenal, phenomenal, final projects. I didn't do it the second time cause I thought, “Should I be doing this in a composition class, like a one page flyer?” And they were not as well executed. Students like to think creatively, and doing a one-page flyer with images and doing it in whatever way they want it to do, sets them up with that synthesis, so those become paragraphs and they can incorporate all of their sources, incorporate their own voice in there, and it just became such a stepping stone. I can't wait to teach it again because I'm adding that flyer back in. I think it's one of the best things I do. It gets them to synthesize, it gets them to develop, it gets into organize so much better and it really does come out so incredibly clear and thoughtful.

And I know it's the multimodality, they love messing with images and sounds, and that kind of thing. I wish we could do all of it that way, to be honest. Usually, students, the only time that they have to write the kind of essays that they write in school, are at school, right? They're never going to do that anywhere else. And, but they also know that if they just put enough information down, right, they can just keep going on and on and on. Multimodality has them being more thoughtful about what they choose to include. So that's why I think the assignments are more spot on. I don't really grade on language as long as I understand their ideas. I'm down with that. It's just, did you do the assignment? Did you just follow directions? And that kind of thing.

And so, knowing that, I think helps too, the pressure is off of you to not have to make it like perfect. I can't even begin to tell you how effective they are with fewer words, getting the same

points across that they would probably have done in a six or eight page essay. I can't say enough about multimodality, especially in the two-year college where, if I'm right, that the students are more creative and there's just that creative aspect of it, they do better when they can be creative. Patrick Sullivan talks a lot about creativity in the classroom, if anybody's interested in learning more about it.

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