

Episode 25: Chris M. Anson

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Chris Anson. Chris has made significant contributions to composition and rhetoric, most notably in writing across the curriculum, response to student writing, and writing assessment. He's been a huge influence on my teaching and research, and he's also one of the most approachable people I know. Whenever we talk, we talk about teaching but we also talk about family and music. I'm happy and thankful he wanted to be on the podcast.

Chris M. Anson is Distinguished University Professor, Professor of English, and Director of the Campus Writing and Speaking Program at North Carolina State University, where he teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in language, composition, and literacy and works with faculty across the curriculum to improve undergraduate education in the areas of writing and speaking. Before moving to NCSU in 1999, he spent fifteen years at the University of Minnesota, where he directed the Program in Composition from 1988-96. Chris has published 16 books and over 130 journal articles and book chapters and is on the editorial or reader's boards of numerous journals, including *College English*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Across the Disciplines*, *Written Communication*, *Assessing Writing*, and *The Journal of Writing Assessment*.

Chris, thanks for joining us.

SW: I want to start by talking about your graduate school experience, specifically the moments you were introduced to rhetoric and composition in the late 1970s and early 80s at Indiana University. I feel like you were in this unique position where you were seeing the field form and take shape—theories and practices were emerging. What was that like?

CA: Well if you go back a little bit earlier, I was at Syracuse University doing a master's in creative writing before I got to Indiana. And my first semester there I was working as an administrative assistant in an office of something called Project Advance, which was one of the first advanced-college dual-credit programs in the country. And I was working alongside of a newly minted professor out of the University of Chicago named Bob Schwegler, who had taken a position at Syracuse after earning his degree. And one of our responsibilities was to help to shape the writing curriculum, so that high school teachers could be trained to teach high-performing high school students, in order to earn a Syracuse credit while they were seniors in high school.

So I got to talking with him, and I was really interested in everything that I was doing in the English department. I was interested in all the areas of literary study I was doing, and in creative writing. I was really interested in Medieval literature and Old English. And I kept talking to him about what I might do next after this master's, because I knew I wasn't going to probably become the world's next greatest novelist. And so he started to tell me, he said well what do you want to do? And I said I'm interested in Medieval literature. And he said you're probably not going to find it very easy to get a position when you graduate. There are not a lot of jobs in Medieval

literature. But there's this new area that's on the horizon that's developing. It goes by various terms, but typically composition studies, rhetoric and composition, and you should come to a reading group that I'm involved in with several other faculty and start reading some of the material in that.

I signed on as a young graduate student, and the faculty were reading early, early composition work by people like Janet Emig and James Britton and others, and I got really fascinated in that work. When I explained that to my creative writing peers, they didn't want anything to do with it. They really felt that it was not appropriate to dissect the writing process. This was something that worked by talent and inspiration, not something that you could scientifically anatomize. So I really kind of fell away from that ideology, and I started reading more, going to more of these meetings, and getting more exposed to the literature of the time.

At the same time, that next semester, I was then thrown into two sections of first-year composition with very little training. It was a very lock-step, very traditional program that relied on the creation of five paragraph themes. The textbook that everybody used was Baker's Complete Stylist. And so I was feeling these tensions between some of the work I was reading, that was very inspirational and process oriented, and this rather lock-step traditional curriculum that I was kind of mandated to teach.

But I became so interested in that, that when I finished the MA, toward the last weeks or months of that degree, Schwegler suggested that I apply to Ph.D. programs, and there were very few at that time. It was 1979, 1980. There was one at UT Austin, there was one at Indiana, some other places. And I got into those programs, and I decided to go to Indiana for several reasons. They had a Ph.D. program that was either concentrated in literature, or in English language and linguistics, and the composition degree was a specialization within either of those tracks.

SW: So you get to Indiana, and then what? What did you learn about teaching writing, and what has stuck with you about those early years in the writing classroom?

CA: When I got to Indiana, the director of composition was a guy by the name of Michael Flanagan, who ended up leaving I think a year, or year and a half, later to take a one-year position as a distinguished professor at the University of Oklahoma. And he then stayed in that position and never returned, but he became a fast mentor to me, and then eventually a really close friend of mine and my then future wife. So it was really Michael who helped me to understand what we're dealing with, with student learners and student writers. I had not really had that much exposure directly in the classroom at Syracuse. I was very teacher-centered. I was very concerned about my knowledge, my projection of knowledge, my appearance even, and not thinking much about what was really happening in the heads of my students.

When I got to Indiana all that changed, because Michael soon helped me to understand and put into practice what I had been reading at Syracuse in that reading circle. I learned a great deal from him. I think I owe it to Bob Schwegler that I'm in the field, and I owe it to Michael Flanagan that I learned to teach, I think, in a responsible and student-centered way. When I think about what I was doing at Syracuse, it was stand in the front of the room and maybe lecture a little bit on principles of form or style, or even grammar, and not really think about what was

happening with the students, and really not do much that was active. Flanagan changed all that for me. I mean, his curriculum was focused on active learning, on student engagement. Teachers didn't spend a whole lot of time in front of the class. They would present some things and get students to work. There would be lots of active discussion, a lot of small group work, a lot of follow-up, and that stuck with me ever since.

I mean, when I started doing that I realized how utterly different the pedagogy was, how completely engaged the students were. I had no idea whether they were engaged before, and I pass classes every day here on my campus where students are sitting in rows, and we have no idea what's really going on in their minds. But when you engage students in active learning processes, group work and so on, they have to be socially involved in the class, and they have to be actively engaged. Flanagan had an expression at that time that has stuck with me, and I've actually passed it on to countless graduate students who I've worked with. And it is if something's going wrong in the class, if things aren't working out, he said, "When in doubt, group." When in doubt, group, and I've done that many times when I've thought something's not really working here. Okay, get together in some small groups or pairs. I want you to deal with this question, and then let's come back together. And of course the discussion or the interaction is always richer as a result of that.

So these are the kinds of things I think paradigmatically, in terms of pedagogy, that have stuck with me. It's maybe the main principle, and I've railed against pure lecture for years. That although the evidence is mixed about what happens, in terms of learning and learning outcomes, I'm convinced that you have to have people involved in what they're doing.

SW: Your research on response to student writing has been a consistent thread in your teaching career. I'm thinking about your article "What Good Is It? The Effects of Teacher Response on Students' Development" (2012). I'm also thinking about your contribution to 12 Readers Reading in 1995, which became a foundational collection to teacher response research. More recently, you've studied students' perception on screen capturing technologies. Something that has really stood out to me about your work is your focus on students. Teacher response is one of those areas that can potentially lend itself to a focus on what to do as teachers, but you make it a point to consider how students interact with response or respond to teacher response. Can you talk about how you became interested in feedback, and how you saw a need to focus on students' attitudes and perceptions on teacher response?

CA: Yeah. I became very interested in teacher response way back as a graduate student. And the material that was being published at that time, the research literature, was focused primarily on what teachers were doing, I think in an attempt to theorize, or create models or approaches to teacher response that would be most effective, without really testing out whether they were effective. So we saw a number of different articles and research studies looking at what kinds of marginal comments teachers wrote, what kinds end comments they wrote, studies categorizing teacher comments, and the different kinds and so on. There wasn't really much interest in what was happening in the minds of students. There wasn't much interest in the reception of that commentary until more recently. And so now I think we're seeing considerable new research that's looking at student response to teacher response.

I became interested in the student perspective when I started using cassette tapes to respond to my students' writing. And I inherited that from my mentor, Michael Flanagan, who was doing that in the graduate courses that I was taking with him. He would record on a cassette tape long analyses of our projects. And I started doing that with my own first year writing students. I would ask them to bring in a cassette tape that they didn't want. And many of them would bring in a music cassette tape that they'd popped the little tab out of so it would actually record, there's a protection tab on those. So I learned a lot about my students from what they were giving up, what they didn't want to listen to anymore, so that was kind of interesting.

But I would get these tapes - I had bought a little cassette tape holder with a handle on it at Kmart - and I would go in and collect all the tapes and put them in this little satchel, and then take it back home and read their paper, turn on the tape recorder and record sometimes 20, 30 minutes at a stretch, whole weekends of just me mumbling in my study. And my students, I've always done surveys on specific methodologies that I'm experimenting with in the classroom. Not student evaluation surveys, but additional ones, and I asked my students to comment on the use of cassette tapes and they really loved it. I learned a lot about what they liked or didn't like about the cassette tapes and how I could refine those a little bit.

So I started doing that with almost every class I was teaching until, over the years, cassette tapes started to disappear from use. And at that time, because computer technology was replacing things like cassette tapes, there wasn't enough bandwidth to do much with oral recorded response. The flash drives of the time were so small in terms of memory that you couldn't put anything on them just to swap them in class. And we didn't have the bandwidth, we didn't have a Cloud to be able to send oral comments, so for a few years they just fell by the wayside. I stopped doing the oral responses.

And then, obviously, with computer technology getting more and more enhanced and more memory and so forth, when those capacities increased I went back to doing first oral recordings using computer technology. And then eventually, when I discovered screencasting, I thought this is fabulous. Because not only can I speak to the students, but I can have their paper on screen, and I can refer to certain passages or paragraphs, and highlight things as I scroll, as I'm talking, and that turns into kind of a miniature video that the students can then watch and hear me speaking. So I was absolutely enthralled by screencasting, and I did more surveys with my students who said they loved it.

SW: How did that research come about, and what did you discover about using screen casting technologies for teacher response?

CA: My colleagues and I set up the first research study, in which we got several sections of first year composition and we trained the teachers to use screencasting. And then they did summative, evaluative commentary on the students' papers using screencast. Before that, on the first project, they had done standard written commentary. Almost everyone used insert comments and wrote end notes on papers digitally. And then in the second main project they did the screencasting instead, and then we surveyed the students extensively about their impressions of the written compared to the screencast. And then we pulled out probably 15 students from the larger group to do much more extensive interviews with. We replayed the screencast commentary. They could

stop at various points and tell us what they were thinking, what their impressions were about their teachers.

The results of the first study were, and I know we don't use words like astonishing when it comes to objective scientific research, but I will say they were extremely statistically, significantly different. The screencast condition was off the charts in terms of students' positive feelings. And particularly in terms of their affective feelings, feelings about the approachable-ness, the kindness, the attention from their teachers, compared to the written commentary. So we knew we were onto something, and we started redoing the study in different contexts, first in other disciplines and then in online sections. The same results. In fact, the online sections were even a little bit stronger, I think, for obvious reasons, because they weren't actually meeting their teachers, and they can in this case hear their voices.

So I think we've found something important about the nature of response, and it has to do with affect, with the way that the students feel about the relationship that is being established through the response process. And I'm convinced now that the written response, although it doesn't have to do this, I think it tends to socially distance the students from the teachers somehow, that the oral recording erases, or the distance sort of narrows and teachers get closer. And these were in evaluative context, so even students who were getting C's were still blown away by the screencasting. They found it extremely helpful.

And one of the most interesting findings from that research was - and this came out in both the open-ended survey questions and also in the interviews - was first the students said they loved it when their teachers addressed them by their first name, and almost every teacher did that every time they recorded a screencast. They would say hey Chris, how's it going? I've read your paper and et cetera. We didn't find any cases where the teachers addressed their students by their first names in the written commentary. It's possible. You can write a letter or a note at the end saying Dear Chris, I've read your paper, and et cetera, but it's less likely. So that was one curiosity, was that for some reason the students felt that this first-name basis was important to them.

SW: We've spent time talking about teacher response to student writing. I want to turn our attention to peer review, students responding to students. I think good peer review – beneficial, effective, useful, productive – peer review is an art. For me, a lot of teaching happens when I introduce peer review to first-year students. A lot of reconfiguring, a lot of facilitating what it looks like, and buying into the importance of peer review as foundational to a student centered classroom. How do you use peer review in your first-year writing classroom?

CA: First of all, I think the skills of peer review are developmental in some respects, so that when you have traditional college-aged students coming in from high school, they are less adept, in my mind, at peer review than, for example, returning adult students or graduate students, or when I work with faculty in WAC workshops. I don't have to tell them how to interact with each other, let's say around drafts of syllabi or writing assignments. They stay on task, they're socially adept, they provide each other with really good feedback. I don't need to instruct them on how to do that. And then when we follow up, of course, they all say it was great, I got a lot of valuable comments, I thought in new ways about my teaching, et cetera, et cetera.

When you have traditional-age college students, you and I both know that there's a whole lot of orientation that's required, not just in terms of what they're focusing on and how to focus on it, but also just in terms of the social dynamics of peer review. My first-year students will often try to crane their necks at each other, like look over their shoulder at each other, when they're starting to do peer review. And I have to say you need to actually physically change the configuration of your seating, turn your chairs so that you're actually forming a group, so you can see each other. So it's that basic sometimes, but I've found that the preparation is absolutely essential. And I think, as you mentioned, so often teachers put students into a peer review group. They say read each other's papers, or read them beforehand and then provide each other with comment. They might give them a few questions to think about, but they haven't really prepared them for all those complicated interpersonal and social dynamics. They haven't maybe given them the kind of language that they need to focus on specific elements of writing.

So I spend a great deal of time up front. I have video clips of groups that are dysfunctional. We'll look at those and talk about what's going wrong. Why is only one person dominating the conversation? How do you avoid doing that? What's productive about this? What's not? We have transcripts of peer review sessions, and they can look at those. And then we talk a lot about what they need to be looking for, what kind of information they should get from the author, and so on. When I do writing across the curriculum work, I often say that peer response, or peer review, groups are the most often tried once and abandoned method in writing across the curriculum. And the reason is that teachers put students together and they just expect everything, they expect miracles, they expect great revision, and the students are talking about other things. They don't really know what to focus on. They say I liked it, and there's not much more to say. So, to my mind, the more you invest in preparing students for peer review the better they're going to run.

SW: This is my last question, and this sort of connects back to the first question. You talked about your own experience in graduate school and teaching, and what that was like, so I'm interested in what kind of advice you would give to a first-time teacher?

CA: Some of what we want teachers to think about as they first start teaching are the mundanities, the planning kinds of processes. I find a lot of times I'm working with relatively new teachers who haven't scripted their class session. They've got a general sense of what they want to do, but they haven't really scripted it down to the episodes, and they haven't tied those to specific learning goals that they want to accomplish within each class. So some of it comes down to some really simple kinds of routines, getting used to really carefully planning your class, and seeing whether the class session will contribute to the broader learning goals of the course.

The other thing I think I'd suggest to them is to not to think of themselves as the center of their students' learning, which goes back to what I was saying earlier, that they need to get used to realizing that the students are bringing their own knowledge, their own resources in, and we need to sort of tap into those. In some cases we're reconstructing existing knowledge, but we can't act as if they are sort of tabula rasas, right? We have to think about what it is that they're bringing in, what kind of community we can establish in the classroom, how we can contribute to that collective dialogue. And not always see ourselves as the givers of truth, rather that we're facilitating the construction of meaning and knowledge.

There's a lot of that floating around, that kind of language, and I understand that it's pretty commonplace. It's making it happen that's hard. So we can tell students who are new to teaching to do that, but we have to show them ways that they can kind of pull themselves away a little bit, and have their students generate some of the knowledge and information, tap into what they're experiencing and what they already know. There's an old expression in Montessori teaching that's called follow the child. And in Montessori instruction, the idea is that the child is going to bring in a certain eagerness to do certain things and learn certain ways, and if we subvert that then we're shutting down the incentives for their learning. So that's another thing, another principle, I think we can use, is what is it that the students are interested in, and how can we follow those and then sort of feed them?

Because engagement is crucial we know. If students are not engaged they're not going to learn. There's a lot of research on engagement now, and we know that it helps retention. Students stick around when they say they're more engaged, and it contributes to completion and success. So how do we get students engaged? How do we make them feel as if they're really in their learning, so that a class period goes by and we don't even feel the time? It's the opposite situation is where everybody's looking at their cell phone watches, because they don't wear watches anymore. They're looking at the time or the clock on the wall, just waiting for the class to end, and not feeling engaged. So those are some things I'd suggest is get yourself out of yourself, be more student facing. Think about how you can coordinate your class sessions in ways that engage students. Be imaginative.

I find a lot of times we're inheriting practices that are dull, and have always been so, and we're replicating them just because we experienced the same thing. This is certainly true for designing writing assignments, because I work with faculty in other disciplines, and they've inherited the dullest, most boring, uninspiring, canonical assignment designs. And if they give themselves permission to be imaginative, to create interesting scenarios, to do something a little bit more creative - and we all have that potential - then their students get all of the sudden quite engaged, and they write better and get better class sessions out of it. There's so much, of course, Shane. I mean, there's so much that you want new teachers to learn. It's a hugely complex process, but those would be some principles I think I'd begin with, is engagement, inspiration, creativity, student facing, those kinds of things.