

Episode 52: Cody Hoover

Transcript

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

In this episode, I get the chance to talk with my good friend, Cody Hoover. Cody and I went to school together at Fresno State. He was getting his MA in Literature and I was getting my MA in Composition Theory. And we worked in the writing center together and took some classes together as well. I guess that's been about eight or so years ago now. I always feel energized about teaching anytime we get the chance to catch up. Cody is one of those people who is always thinking about how to revise his own pedagogical practices and assignments and reimagine how colleges and classrooms can better support students. I actually invited Cody to come on to the podcast because he's taught in so many different institutional contexts, from four-year universities to two-year colleges, and I wanted to get his perspective about teaching writing at different Hispanic-Serving Institutions, or HSIs. I also wanted to hear more about how those contexts have helped shape his teaching.

In this episode, we talk about Clovis Community College, how he encourages students to write about their identities and communities, embracing and advocating for linguistic diversity, and his experiences as a teacher and student at multiple Hispanic-Serving Institutions.

Cody is an English Instructor at Clovis Community College in Fresno, CA, where he's taught full time since 2019. Cody's work in his MA at Fresno State and half-PhD at the University of California, Riverside was primarily in 19th-Century Studies, though, now he focuses on composition and rhetoric since making the move to community college in 2017. Cody's presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication and various Victorian conferences over the years.

Cody, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Clovis Community College is a Hispanic-Serving Institution in central California. Can you talk more about Clovis Community College and your approach to teaching writing? What are some values or practices that help you build a community of learners in the writing classroom?

CH: Yeah, Clovis Community College. I'll talk a little bit about the school in general. It's a newer community college. It was established fully as a college in 2015, within the past five years. It's in Fresno, California. They say we have 13,000 students now, but I think that's between all the extension campus stuff and dual enrollment and things like that. So it's a pretty small campus. We have three buildings on campus. We're teaching a lot of students and our enrollment is always going up. It's still small, which I think is good for, like you were saying about building a community of learners, I think having the small campus really helps with that. A lot of the students in my classes are taking other classes with each other just because the way their schedules work out and stuff.

So in terms of...you were saying the kind of environment or community in the classroom, I do a lot of group work and projects in class. Overall, I guess my philosophy, in general, I'm trying

to...my role, especially in a composition class, is to train them and give them a set of tools to question and problematize their identities and their communities. And so that, not only can they share them within the classroom community, but then actually point to issues that exist within those communities or with the identities that they bring to the classroom. I guess overall, that's the culture I suppose that I'm trying to instill in the classroom.

I don't really want to see this percentage of the classroom, we're talking about HSIs, this percentage of the classroom are Latinx students...and so I'm not going to have this specific issue that has to do with the Latinx community in my class as part of the theme that we're working with or whatever. That is artificial to me and also doesn't invite students to really share their actual experiences because you're giving it to them already or telling them, "This is what it is." Because for me, I'm half Latinx, so my experience growing up is way different than other people's experiences. So it's interesting, I've been in a lot of classes as a student where it's like, "Come on guys, you all have this experience, but most people don't." Giving students a set of tools to think through different issues that they're bringing or different problems that they're bringing to the table, that's my approach.

SW: How do you invite conversations about students' lived experiences in the classroom, or how do you encourage students to think critically about their own identities and communities?

CH: My first-year writing class at Clovis, it's called English 1A, in that class I have...I call it a "community issue project," where we spend a little bit of time, the first class session of the unit talking about what is a community? And also, what is an issue? Or what is a problem? And it's always interesting because it's such a hurdle in thinking for students to get over, trying to understand just what a community can be and also what an issue can be, especially an issue or a problem as more than just something that some individual has, sort of like everyday problem that they encounter, but something instead that can be seen more as a systemic problem, that a whole group or a whole community or society can experience.

So we spend the first session of class talking about that. They first need to identify a community that they're a part of and it can be literally any community that they want to talk about. So it can be your family. And then the next thing is thinking of what's an issue or a problem that's happening within that community. So it gets them thinking about why is this a problem? What are some of the material realities that go into trying to solve this problem? What's the history of people trying to solve this problem in the past? I think it's really helpful having them think about that stuff, but then especially when we're doing peer reviews and group work and stuff and the exploration of these issues, and developing the papers and stuff, because then they get to share about what their community is and what the issue is. And most of the time it's interesting hearing people say like, "I didn't even know that was a thing?" There's a lot of learning that happens in those moments because students are finding out stuff that they've just never been exposed to.

SW: So this assignment is one way to examine communities and systemic issues. I imagine this work is also driven by an emphasis on valuing linguistic variations or the language habits and patterns students use. What does it look like to embrace and advocate for linguistic diversity at Clovis Community College?

CH: Well, I think what you're saying...in talking and sharing about these different communities and things like that, there's clearly a different set of language that they use to talk about those things. So, I mean to me, linguistic diversity, in that general discussion, especially in the context of a comp class, always goes back to how do you respond to or how do you assess grammar in student writing? So if students are writing about a specific community, that they obviously know a lot about, we have no place in changing that or trying to correct that or anything like that. And so I feel in terms of advocating for it...I think it's an easier job than a lot of teachers think of it as, just like valuing their own linguistic diversity.

This is the kind of language that you're using to talk about your own community and that's the language that you should be using because you're talking about your own community. I think in general, too, an avenue in which we could get into that conversation is some of the fear, anxiety that goes into writing a lot of the time for students. I think a big part of it is just like, they're trying so hard to say things in the "right" way or they know exactly what they want to say, but the hang-up is just like, "How do I actually say it?"

I don't care how it sounds. And a big part of that is free writing and stuff like that, just get it down on the page and then we'll talk about it from there. Nine times out of ten, I feel like when they free write it and just let it happen, to me I read it and I'm like, "Sounds pretty good. This sounds all right." It wasn't a huge issue in correctness or anything to begin with. I think there's just a lot of anxiety about the way that people talk or the way that they write.

SW: And that kind of anxiety has been built from years and years and years of students being taught that there is a "right" way to write, so a specific kind of language is more valuable than others, which is extremely problematic.

CH: It obviously gets into so many other issues about professional spaces and things like that, and the kinds of standard English that are supposedly accepted in those professional spaces. And in talking about different communities, we talk about how there's a certain language that you use; there are certain words and acronyms and stuff and abbreviations that people use, and in a different community, they have no clue what you're talking about. So to me it's like the same thing. It's like all these different spaces have different kinds of language that we use.

SW: So you've taught at multiple Hispanic-Serving Institutions and four-year universities and two-year colleges: Fresno State, UC Riverside, Moreno Valley College, Fresno City College, West Hills College Lemoore, and now Clovis Community College. How have these contexts helped shape your teaching?

CH: Well, I guess first, maybe we can talk a little bit about the context of HSIs, because I feel a lot of schools in California, I feel like almost all of them would be an HSI. I was poking around and reading about it a little bit. I was reading their bylaws and I was just curious about like what does it actually take to be designated as an HSI? Apparently only 25% of your student population needs to be Hispanic and that can be full-time or part-time students. I think it really just depends on if the college actually wants to apply for the HSI designation, apparently you just do that and have to have that certain percentage of students who are Hispanic and then you pay the yearly dues or whatever.

It seems a big part of it, there's a lot of federal grants that colleges can get through being part of that. It seems like a very top-down thing. It's something that maybe administrators are concerned about. I'm generally cynical about this stuff, in general. So I'm like...it seems like a marketing thing or something or just something admin care about to get grant money. I don't know, because on like a student or faculty level, I feel there isn't anything that really is different. Maybe those of us who teach at these institutions, especially in somewhere like California or maybe Texas or something like that, maybe we need to do more reflection about what that designation means, and also if it means anything to our students. Because for me, someone who was a student and a teacher at only these kinds of institutions, it isn't something that I've thought much about or has even really been anything I've been aware of.

So doing a little bit of reading or research about it was the most I've ever learned about it. It is weird to think about, it has to meet that 25% threshold *only*. I feel it's like a line in a brochure or something like that, and especially in California, I feel there's a large tendency for different institutions to do this where it's like, "Oh, we're an HSI. That checks off our diversity box. So we're all good because we have this one thing that we can cling on." I think, especially in California, which is such a liberal state, you have to think about how much of a neo-liberal state it is, how it constantly is continuing these different modes of oppression of nonwhite students, or students of color. So I feel maybe it's a cynical thing, but you could almost see that HSI designation is perhaps another tool of systemic oppression where it's like, "Well, we got the HSI thing, we're all good that's all we need to do."

SW: This is my last question, and maybe this is more focused on your experiences as a student. In what ways can Hispanic-Serving Institutions better support students?

CH: I feel like something that is, and maybe this is partly a community college situation, being a student and also teaching at Fresno State and UC Riverside, which are universities, there were definitely a lot more ethnic studies courses like Latinx culture and history. At Clovis, we don't really have any of those courses. When I was thinking about this last night, I went back and looked through the catalog to make sure that I wasn't just talking out of my ass with this, but it's just a handful of courses, like a Latinx literature course, I think a class in sociology, there's some different courses, but we don't have an ethnic studies department or specifically ethnic studies professors or anything like universities that are HSIs might have.

So I feel it's so much about running certain classes that will actually have enrollment, which is true everywhere, but also our classes have to fulfill, most of the time, some other requirement if the students choose to transfer. I think maybe from teaching and being a student at Fresno State and UCR, something I've learned is how important those courses are. So like how I've been saying, I'm not even quite sure of how important the HSI label is as much as is the institution fully supporting and funding these courses and things like Latinx culture and history and that sort of stuff. It doesn't surprise me that Clovis Community College is an HSI because it fulfills 25% barrier or whatever, because of the funding we have and the courses that we offer to fulfill transfer requirements. We don't have any of those courses. That's a pretty big hole. I taught at Fresno City College, which has a long history of offering those courses. So I guess just to answer

your question, a lesson that I've learned is that I think it's most important to offer those courses regularly.

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