

Episode 150: Colton Wood

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

Pedagogue launched in 2019 with the goal of amplifying perspectives and experiences on teaching writing across institutions. For the most part, I feel like the podcast has promoted a wide range of perspectives across post-secondary education contexts. Starting out, my hope was for Pedagogue to be a platform that fills gaps in more traditional alphabetic scholarship, which often privileges teachers situated in more research-intensive universities that have space and time to publish. I wanted the podcast to be a space that embraces and showcases experiences and knowledges from all types of classrooms, for us to consider and think about what teaching writing looks like, what it means to teach writing in different contexts, from two-year colleges to Historically Black Colleges and Universities, to Hispanic-Serving Institutions, to private colleges, to small liberal arts colleges, to large and small public universities.

Through all these episodes, there's still something missing. The voices and perspectives of teachers at Tribal Colleges and Universities. I taught basic writing and first year composition at a Tribal College as an adjunct for almost two years, and those students and classrooms impacted my perception and understanding of teaching more than any other context. There are currently 32 fully accredited Tribal Colleges and Universities in the United States, serving approximately 30,000 full-time and part-time students according to the US Department of Education. This is the first episode in a 10-week series that highlights tribal colleges and universities.

In this episode, Colton Wood talks about teaching at the College of the Muscogee Nation, first year writing curriculum, storytelling and what he wished people knew about Tribal Colleges and Universities.

CW: But there came a point where I came back to college, and I was actually a student here at the College of Muscogee Nation. And so, getting to experience that tribal college experience and seeing how my teachers approached the issue kind of really influenced me in how I approach the issue now. And so I try to, other teachers will get this is, I try to take the academics out of what we're teaching and try to make it more on a personal basis.

Colton Wood is an English professor at the College of the Muscogee Nation where he employs various teaching techniques to enhance student writing. Mr. Wood emphasizes student engagement and adaptability to improve student participation in learning. Mr. Wood is a doctoral candidate at Southern Nazarene University where the focus of his dissertation is on the perceptions of indigenous students at predominantly white universities. Mr. Wood co-sponsors the Tribal Leadership Circle student organization, serves as a CMN coordinator of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium Student Activities and serves as Secretary of the Faculty Council.

Colton, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You teach at the College of the Muscogee Nation. Can you talk more about your institutional context?

CW: Yeah, well first thanks for having me. So at the College of Muscogee Nation, we are a small institution. This next coming year will be 20 years in service, and so we are still, as we kind of talk about around here, we are coming out of this survival period and moving into more of a thrive period. And so we're starting to see a lot of growth, but we're still a small institution. We're made up of, I think there's 13 instructors here altogether across the board. So you imagine with 13 of us, a lot of us teach four or five classes, so there's just a small offering of classes each. We're a trimester school currently, so a small amount of classes offer each trimester to where we're starting to see record numbers of students come in. But even with that, we're looking upwards of 250 students or something and that's big to us, but we're in the middle of nowhere. Perspectively, you look on a map, it's hard to really kind of pinpoint us, but we're South of Tulsa in Okmulgee, Oklahoma, which is the capital of the Muscogee Nation.

I don't know, something like five miles from here is where our tribal headquarters are. Here in Oklahoma, our tribe has become a pretty hot topic due to the McGirt ruling that happened a couple years ago in the Supreme Court and the Muscogee Nation has kind of become the forerunner in all that. So as that's happened there with the nation and the nation supports us in just about everything we do. We've kind of filtered that in and there's been spotlights kind of put on us in that aspect. But like I said, we're in the middle of little old country town. Here where we're at, it's kind of a unique thing that you don't see in a lot of areas. If you were to go down the road from us, right next door, we have a technical school that serves high school and adult learners, and then right next door to that is Oklahoma State Institute of Technology and they have a huge campus.

And so we kind of pull in a lot of college students here and a lot of our college students may take classes here and also at these other institutions there at the same time. But we serve primarily indigenous students. We're starting to see indigenous students that come from all across Indian country. We have students that come all the way from far up North to out West. And then of course we have a primary set of students from in Oklahoma. And even with that, yeah, we're the College of Muscogee Nation. Initially our target was to serve the Muscogee people, but now there's a mix. There's a huge mix, whether that's through the five tribes or through the Plains tribes or the Southwest tribe, we're starting to see a really diverse population. And then even with that, we still have a small number of non-indigenous students. Most times that amounts to high school students coming and take concurrent classes. And that's an interesting experience because we fight the stigma of we only serve native students, you have to be native, you have to hold a CDIV card or whatever that may be to be a qualifier to be here. And that's not true. We serve everybody. We are a public institution. Anybody can come in and we're happy to serve everybody.

Most of our students do come from rural areas, just like is represented here. In Oklahoma, that's probably the majority of students that you see come from these rural areas where you have maybe 10 to 15 towns throughout Oklahoma that are not necessarily rural. And even a lot of those places are still rural. I don't know how you can classify the different levels of rural areas there, but we definitely have them here. And so we get, as far as educational levels go, we get

quite a different spread of students. Are getting students now who are seeking education as a primary track. But before the last couple years, probably right at the start of Covid, we started seeing, we were serving students that were primarily going to go into the workforce. That was their whole goal. They needed an associate's degree to get a job with the tribe or to hold some office within the tribe.

And now we're starting to shift to having more of an academic target where our students are starting to head off to four-year institutions or whatever may be their track after that. We don't have many writing classes here on campus. Generally, there's four offers. So, we teach two sections of Comp one, two sections of Comp two. I'm the primary writing instructor, and then I have one other instructor who assists and teaches some night classes, and that may be either a Comp one or Comp two class depending on need. So just to kind of put that in perspective there.

SW: What guides your approach to teaching writing? What are some values or ideas you want students to take from your classes?

CW: I think my approach to education is probably a lot different than most people, and maybe there are a lot of people in my situation, but for one, I never thought I was going to be a teacher. Teaching was not on my grand scale, even though I probably should have listened to a lot of my elders around me and paid attention to that because the one thing I always heard growing up was, you need to be a teacher, teaching what you need to do. And I ignored it and wanted not to do it, but here I am. But when I go and work with these students, I think about myself and the situation. I was a great student all through high school, but I got to college and I went to a college that was not for me. They just didn't know maybe how to assist me. I just didn't fit in. And it showed. I flunked out of my first year of college and went into the workforce and just started my life like anybody else. But there came a point where I came back to college and I was actually a student here at the College of Muscogee Nation. And so getting to experience that tribal college experience and seeing how my teachers approach the issue kind of really influenced me in how I approach the issue now.

And so I try to, other teachers will get this is, I try to take the academics out of what we're teaching and try to make it more on a personal basis. And as I'm lecturing in class or we're discussing things, I always tell them, I'll tell them what we're talking about as far as what the book's going to explain to you. And I explain to them what in more of lay terms, academics like to say this and this is what this means, but here's what we're really talking about and try to break it down so they have this approach to feel like knowledge is really accessible. Because I think for a lot of native students that come in, especially it's first generation students or maybe just students where education's not really valued in their family, it can feel like a huge barrier. And so trying to tear down those walls as much as possible I feel like really helps them. A lot of what I try to do is work one-on-one with them. We may sit in the classroom and brainstorm their ideas and I always try to, because one thing I always hear is, "I can't write that. I can't think of anything." And so I always try to take it down to, "Well, what do you like? What are you interested in? Let's dive into that." Because I always tell my students that the best thing that you can write about is something you're interested in because when you have to spend an absorbent amount of time on it, you're not going to want to do it unless you're interested in it. And so that's a lot of ways that I approach that. I find a lot of my students that come in here, a lot of them lack

writing skills. It's just something they either got by with or did enough to get by. And so we really work on building those skills up. When I'm grading papers and giving feedback, I really focus on things they can do to improve. I think when I started here, I had a different perspective that I was expecting maybe more perfect students or students who were going to know what they needed to do. And kind of after seeing that and understanding, well, okay, here's how I need to approach this. I need to figure out ways to help them get better. So now when I am teaching class, the first assignment I may give them, I tell them, like this is probably not going to be great. I want you to give me whatever you have. And then by the end assignment, we start working towards polishing those essays off and making them look like they have definitely earned these set of skills and that they're valuable to them.

SW: Colton, what texts and writing assignments do you use? How do students respond to them?

CW: It kind of depends class to class, and if I'm a one man team and now that we're getting a lot of students, I may have a fall and spring semester where I'm teaching upwards of 80 students. And so as a one man team that takes a lot of a mental capacity and as most small institution instructors or anywhere that's going to understand, that's not the only thing you do. And so within that, I never keep one assignment. There may be one or two that are the same in every class, but I mix them up just for my pure sake of mind. Yeah. I'm a little different off the scale. I find stuff that I find interesting and try to make it to where they're going to find it interesting. So we both have an enjoyable experience, but a lot of what I'll do is I try to have them maybe focus on some family stories. My comp one students generally will always write a narrative story. And so when we're building up that narrative story, I tell them to think about real life experiences they've had or what stories have you heard from your family, what are stories that were told you and think about how they told those stories and how can we translate that to writing? Because that's a lot of how I attack it. If I'm writing a story and want to tell my experience, I go back to think about how are we told these stories because people have been telling stories since the beginning of time. Native people especially, that's how knowledge was traditionally passed through, was through our stories.

And so I really encouraged them to try to think about and tap into that and carry on these traditions of storytelling by also bringing it into the modern time. When it comes to my Comp two students, a lot of times my Comp two classes mainly focused around a lot of research in writing. We focus heavily on that because a lot of our upper level classes here have some component on it and they need to know that going into those. And so I try to give them relevant areas where they're going to use these skills. So we'll write some sort of argument paper. I may have them write an evaluation of something. So whether they pick out a movie or one thing I got pretty popular here this last semester is many people know the show Res Dogs. I had students that were evaluating different episodes through seasons, and like I said, once again, it's finding those things they're interested in.

When it comes to text to use, texts are really hard to find when you're looking at the special student base that we have. And it took me a while to find what I was using because I wanted to have something for the students who come in that are missing a certain set of skills, but also be on the right level for students who come in with those skills and trying to match that. So I found a curriculum for my Comp one students called Hawks Learning, and it does a lot of approach to

where it's a digital component. We have a book, we go through, we lecture, we talk about examples, and I'm a former middle school teacher, so we do lots of hands-on activities because that's what I always like to do, that's how I like to learn. But they also get this digital component that walks them through different questions to analyze these certain skills, and I'm able to get reports on that. And then we go back over those skills if necessary kind of across the board of what the students are facing.

So that way we make it through our Comp one curriculum. So when we go into my Comp two class, they are ready to hit the floor running. And so with my Comp two class, we use this great book. It's probably one of my favorite texts I've used at all time. It's called Everything's an Argument, and it's great. I'm a person who loves to argue. I think my second career should always been a lawyer, but it's really great because it shows the kids how to critically analyze the world around them. And with the world that we're sitting in now where there's so much misinformation and so much information just in general being spread, trying to decipher through that is very hard. And being in what they would consider a potentially vulnerable population, it's really important to know what's true, what's not, and how to kind of source that out. And so that book really walks us through the steps of analyzing those different things and kind of understanding perspectives and motives and different strategies to how information's presented. And so it's really fun to see this process work within these students that a lot of them are like, "Well, I've never thought about it like that. I've never thought that at tax time that these car salesmen are trying to sell us more cars because they know that we have money at this point," and all these different things. And they're starting to see the world around them and how much is being sold to them and advertise to them and be able to analyze what is really useful, what do I need, what do I not need, what do I need to believe? And I think that's been really helpful to our students.

SW: Can you talk more about storytelling and how storytelling is situated in your writing classroom and the role it plays specifically at the College of the Muscogee Nation?

CW: So I think storytelling from our perspective is more than just being creative. Being creative is great and highly encourage that across the board. But I think when it comes from a native perspective on storytelling, there is just something that is deep ingrained inside of us that really comes out and right now across Indian country, revitalization of culture is happening across the board. And I think my part in playing that is kind of pulling these stories out because as little kids, even if you didn't spend a lot of time around elders, you've heard these stories, you've been told them at one point or another, you've heard them from friends. And so whether it's actual cultural stories or it's stories that you made up with your friends around the campfire, whatever that may be, we have this structure that's built inside of us to tell these stories.

So education can be so difficult for minority people in general, but as you are walking through this journey, you've got to have these things that will help you, maybe push you through the struggles because everybody in education, you reach struggles. You reach those three o'clock in the morning not wanting to finish a term paper that's due at eight o'clock and you have to make it and you don't know that you have the willpower. You've got to have these areas behind you that push. And these stories are one way to do that because whether you're Muscogee or not or you're Navajo or Lakota, everybody has these stories of these struggles that our ancestors went through.

And by understanding those stories and being able to purpose them for your own means, coming up with your, what is your story, that's going to help push you through because you know that these people are behind you and that they made sacrifices so you can be here today.

And so I think that that's really what that unique perspective is here, is stories are more than stories. They're essential to who we are. And I think if we don't have those stories, we don't utilize that ability inside of us, I think there's a huge risk of losing it, but also you have this piece of you that's maybe locked away that you're not allowing to come out and express that part of you.

SW: What are some challenges to teaching writing in your institutional context?

CW: One challenge here across the board is we walk this fine line of caring for the student and bettering the student, kind of this balance we keep with them. And I'm the only instructor here at this current time at the College of Muscogee Nation that was a former student here and that has been off to other institutions and received other degrees. So I know what it's like to be a student here and receive that treatment and to also go off to another institution. What we do here is wonderful, there's no doubt about that. But we have to really start gearing our mindset into what is truly better for the student? Is it better to hold them accountable for what's going on here or is it to better to hold their hand and walk them through it? And so one of the challenges I face here is I tend to hold them accountable a lot more, although I try to be as accountable as possible while also being as understanding as possible, is that kind of battles against each other.

But holding them accountable I think is one of the biggest challenges because I know what it's like to be in their shoes. I understand. I know what it's like to be that college student and have those troubles come across that you have no control over and that when you were in their shoes, you wish the instructor would've done this for you. But then at the same time, you understand the values of that lesson that it taught you and that to understand that when tragedy happens, the world doesn't stop, the world keeps going. You've got to figure out how to get through that. And so a lot of times presenting with different problems or issues that may arise, I really try hard to push them through that. And we have tons of resources here to assist them on that personal side, open them up to that.

But we may have this conversation like, "Hey, you've got this and this and this due. We need to make this through, if you want to pass. Come see me. We'll sit here and work together." Or a lot of times the students' situation, I may say, "Well, you got time tonight. Let's get on Zoom like we're doing here and let's meet. What can we do to get you to pass?" Because I'm one of those people. I'm going to sit here and hold my hand out. And as long as you take it, we'll walk that path. Doesn't mean you're going to get excused from it, but I will walk that with you because that's what I think is the better situation to be in long term, is to understand there's people around you willing to help instead of just willing to excuse you from the situation. And that can be a very challenging area for me because unfortunately a lot of times I am the one voice that speaks that. And a lot of times, a lot of the other classes may not operate that way. They tend to be on a lot of the softer side, which is okay, that's what works for them. I just try to, from my own experience and understanding what I went through and what I would want long term, is that's what I try to replicate for my students. And so a lot of times that gives me a reputation. Once I have a group of students who are going to be here on campus for a while, they tell the next

coming students, "Hey, Mr. Woods like this." I always tell them, "As long as you communicate with me, we'll make it through." And so that's what they enforce.

And so when the new students come in, they know if I'm in trouble, I get ahold of Mr. Wood, I'm going to be all right. And so that does benefit me in some areas where I'm one of probably very few teachers here that students don't disappear on me very often, whereas they just don't show up to class. I know a lot of times. And so that's kind of like a benefit and challenge in the same way, but it's an interesting position to be in here.

SW: What do you enjoy the most about teaching writing at the College of the Muscogee Nation?

CW: I think for me, I enjoy writing. I didn't go to college to be a writing teacher, but I've always loved writing. And upon taking this job, I had to take a lot of extra courses to be qualified in this, and I happily took them because I love writing. Writing's been something I think as a native person, I always embraced much like I try to teach my students and I heavily focus in that storytelling aspect. And so within that, it lights a fire inside of me to get these students on a path to start telling their own stories. I really enjoy research and writing. That's another, like maybe a nerdy love of mine, but I love the research aspect of it. I love finding out new information and I love writing about it. And as I mentioned earlier, I love to argue and you can't argue right without the fact. And so I love bringing that to students too, showing them, and maybe it's part of being a minority person, having a chip on your shoulder, but understanding that you're kind of always underhandedly served things. And so when you have the knowledge, you're not necessarily underhanded anymore. It kind of gives you these tools to be able to access that. And so that's what I like to bring to my students, is we may be put in this position, but it doesn't mean we have to stay there. And then I think more or less, the biggest thing to me is at the end of it, because I know I put my students through a lot and they know it too by the end of it, but most times by the end of the semester or the end of the trimesters that they come to me and they say, "Thank you, I really learned a lot. It was hard. We made it through it, but I learned a lot." And so I always appreciate that because yes, at times I want to be very sympathetic. I'm not absent of a heart. I have that, but at the same time I know that what I'm doing is worth it and there's going to be those who appreciate it and that's what it's made for. And so that really, really empowers me in that aspect.

The other thing is it's really important for me because tribal colleges played an important role into where I am today and I'm happy to be back here teaching. And so a lot of the things that happened for me, I want to be there for those students as well. I want to be that person in their life that, like I look back to instructors and I work with instructors now who are here teaching when I was here. And so that's a really great experience. And so I've kind of got to see them from both perspectives now, but I want to be that person in their educational journey that they look at me and say, "Oh yeah, he got me on the right path. He got me to where I believe in that I can accomplish whatever's before me." And so that's kind of like what I do this for, is I love that end results that happen.

SW: This is my last question. What do you wish people knew or understood more about when it comes to Tribal Colleges and Universities?

CW: There's so much, but with tribal colleges, I wish more people would share with more native students that we are here and not just the College of Muscogee Nation because yes, I would love them all to come here and us grow to be a 100 times bigger and serve that kind of mission, but all tribal colleges. We're all here for native students. And I don't know about other tribal colleges, whether they face this problem or not, but here in Oklahoma and Oklahoma in its own unique environment, we, a lot of times are just unknown for whatever reason. And we put out advertisements and stuff, but sometimes we just don't reach people and there are plenty of people who know about us that maybe just don't share for whatever reason. And so I would really want people to know what we do here and we serve native people, and that's our primary mission, is to bring that education to native communities.

And here at the College of Muscogee Nation, we're ingrained with Muscogee values and we are all about culture and education and they're really ingrained here. It's a really unique environment. I believe that we are different than any other college here in Oklahoma. We bring a space that's safe to grow in. We bring an environment that's safe to reconnect in. It's a place to discover, especially if you are a native person that has been disconnected from your tribe or maybe you were adopted out or whatever that may be, we are a place here that you can get an education, but also discover what it's like to be in a native community. For myself, when I came here the very first time, I was not connected through my tribe. I did not know customs or culture or nothing. And coming in here, it was a place for me to reconnect. Without that, I know I wouldn't be where I am today because it opened up this whole new side of me that I'd never known. And that's what we do for students. And so I really want people to know that, that we're more than just an educational institution. We are a cultural institution, that we provide you education, but we provide cultural arts. We provide all sorts of opportunities to discover who you are and who you can be.

And I think that's one of the best things that we have going here for us. We do a lot of great work, and we're fortunate enough, especially here at the College of Muscogee Nation, we have lots of great partners that we work with on our side of the state. And it just seems like every day it's growing and we're always working with new opportunities and really hope people take a look at our students. We have some excellent students that come out here that are going to do some great things, that are already doing great things, and it's just a product of our mission, and we just are really thankful for that.

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