

Episode 23: Darin Jensen

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Darin Jensen about teaching at Des Moines Area Community College, basic writing pedagogies and practices, the characterization of basic writing, and how institutions and programs can better support and prepare teachers for two-year colleges.

Darin Jensen is an English instructor at Des Moines Area Community College in Iowa. He is co-founder and editor of the Teacher-Scholar-Activist blog. His research and teaching concentrate on first-year and developmental writing, critical pedagogies and literacies, and professional issues in the two-year college. His writing appears in chapters, reviews, and journal articles in *TETYC*, *College English*, *Pedagogy*, *Composition Studies*, *the Journal of Developmental Education*, the *WPA Journal* among others.

Darin, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I was hoping we could start with you talking about your institutional context, Des Moines Area Community College, a public community college that operates across six campuses in Iowa, and your teaching and pedagogical practices?

DJ: There are 15 community colleges in Iowa. We cover the largest geographic area. It's something like 6,000 square miles. But we go from Carroll County in central Iowa to the Newton campus. But I would say you'd have to drive two hours to get from one end to the other, east to west. And I teach on the Carroll campus, in particular. That's where I'm housed and that is a rural campus. And so in that context, what's really interesting about the Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) is that we have an urban campus in downtown Des Moines where you have 40 or 50 languages spoken and where you will find every kind of student under the sun. And then you have rural campuses like ours. And then you have a suburban campus in Ankeny, which is really the main campus, which really has a lot of traditional students as well as a lot of trade students. And so one of the things that fascinates me about DMACC is that it really does represent every instructional and student services context that you can imagine. I mean, DMACC has some part of that.

So I teach a lot of Composition I, a lot of Composition II and then I teach a lot of ALP, as well – and that's the basic writing or developmental writing kind of course that I teach. And all of my courses, I would say, would be what I would call literacy-based courses. I would say that we do as much writing or I'm sorry, as much reading as we do writing. Really the last couple of years I've been using Tinberg and Blau and Sullivan's book, *Deep Reading*, because it talks about the need for reading and composition, especially critical reading. So I know your question was about writing pedagogy, but I find that I'm spending most of my time or probably at least half of my time doing a lot of the literacy work. So how do we read critically, how do we annotate, how do we read deeply, how do we read with and against? So it's a lot of literacy work. I would like to

say that we also do critical literacy work where often the topics of my classes are thematically-based and we'll be talking about education.

So maybe education in rural settings, maybe the value of a college education. And so we'll have a series of articles and we'll be writing responses and then moving to papers from that or shorter essays from that. It's that sort of concentrating on bringing their reading level up to a college level, which I'm very dubious about saying "up to a college level", that should be in scare quotes. But it's this idea that a lot of my students don't have highly developed reading habits for whatever reason in what we think as academic reading. When we start to develop those skills, then we start to write about that experience. We grow our writing from our reading and literacy experience.

SW: How many years have you taught basic writing and what are some your goals and outcomes? How do you approach the basic writing classroom?

DJ: 11 years. When I started at Metro (Metropolitan Community College in Omaha), the faculty there, Erin Joy and Susan E. Lee and some other folks all had just revised their developmental writing sequence and they had this great course called "Read and Respond." Again, it was very literacy focused and then building on skills, writing skills. Then they had this kind of studio model that was called "Fundamentals of College Writing." And it was extra credits because you spend extra time and it really was an integrated reading and writing model. So I say that because I think that for me forms the basis of why I do what I do. Because I saw the holistic model that Erin and Susan and others had developed as being the way to teach developmental writing. I mean obviously there's already been lots of critique of skill-based kind of instruction, skill and drill or building sentences.

But the Metro program was really interested in having students write essays, write short essays, write responses, right? But lots and lots of writing and lots of reading. I think that my really is to get students to engage in the process of writing and to understand writing as a process and reading as a process, as a recursive process and that they aren't deficient in and that is really important because I think one of the things that I took into my developmental writing courses is also a discussion of applied linguistics in the sense that many of my students, when you ask them what good English is, they'll say proper, and they come with standard English ideology already embedded into them. They come with middle-class notions of language. The reason they've hated their English classes and they didn't want to go is because they had teachers who were still using current rhetorical or current traditional methods.

So not only getting them to write, but also beginning to critically deconstruct the standard English ideology that has been foisted on them, which is when I taught at Omaha, I taught at a historically African American campus at an African American neighborhood. It was very clear, the kinds of racism hidden in standard English was everywhere. And the students weren't successful and weren't buying in because they didn't ... to buy into those systems, it was immediately oppressive. And when we talk about that in my rural campus too. we talk about

rural English or working-class English in comparison and what are the ideas. What English is or do we have access to?

SW: So I want to talk about the characterization of basic writing. The label “basic writing” was created, in many ways, to resist the dominant use of the word “remedial,” specifically the word remedial attached to “students” and/or “classes.” In what ways do you feel like academia’s understanding of basic writing, and even the broader cultural or public perception, has changed since Mina Shaughnessy’s Errors and Expectations published in 1977?

DJ: Hope Parisi just wrote this magnificent essay in JBW (Journal of Basic Writing) about this and she has a retrospective of exactly the question that you're asking. So here's what I would say. I would say that I am sad that we even read Mina Shaughnessy's book anymore. I think that there's all sorts of problems with it even though she meant well. And that in most composition and pedagogy courses, when we read basic writing, we end up reading a chapter or maybe even the whole of “Errors and Expectations” and I feel like we should leave Mina as a wonderful important historical footnote, but that there's a lot of other work that's been done that is more interesting. I think Susan Naomi Bernstein would say that we shouldn't call anyone “basic writers,” that there's no such thing as a basic writer and she's right. but I don't know what the hell to call people then.

I've been involved with NADE (which is now NOSS), National Association for Developmental Education, and they use this idea of developmental education, which is somehow less damning to me than the notion of basic writing. But to answer one part of your question, our culture still thinks that we have remedial writers and our culture is still ... I still spend time in the writing center getting students who come in and they just want to fix things, right? They have a notion of correctness that dominates their writing. So we do this, still, to people and rather than thinking about ... so every time I get a nursing student in the writing center who's bugged up about APA and it's just like, “You know, you're going to be fine and it doesn't need to be perfect,” except they have nursing instructors who want that to be perfect and it's an enormous part of their grade.

So even outside of writing studies, the notion of correctness of the current tradition that's sort of grammatical is really, really important and it still dominates. I think that one of the failures of writing studies, or maybe one work in progress of writing studies, is that we have not done a good job communicating how people really learn to write and how writing is a process and how writing is something that happens over multiple attempts. It's not like I could just give, not to be flippant, but I couldn't give the nursing faculty Anne Lamott's “Shitty First Drafts” and have them understand, “Oh,” because that's not what the nursing faculty want. They want students who can produce a medical notes and case notes that are accurate and that have a shared grammar. I can't really blame them for that.

I don't know. There's lots of pieces to that question. I don't like the notion of basic writer. However, if we get rid of the idea of basic writing or developmental writing, then we won't have a space. I'm really worried about especially the way developmental education has been under attack, that we won't have a space to give time to students who need the extra help, who need the

extra instruction. At the same time, I think that the other part of it is that we don't do a good job communicating to other publics what good writing instruction looks like.

SW: You mentioned not wanting to lose the space and perhaps even the attention and resources attached to basic writing programs and classrooms. Do you feel like there's a better conception of basic writing that moves away from that label but still very much gets its identity or the work that happens in that space?

DJ: So underprepared or under-resourced, but Christie Toth and Brett Griffiths write this chapter in a book on class and they use the term "poverty effects." I rarely have students, rarely have students who do not have the cognitive abilities to write at a college level, whatever that is. And sometimes they're not motivated because of previous school experiences. Mike Rose writes about that kind of stuff. And sometimes though they've had poor public schooling. This is not blaming high school teachers, but if you grow up working class, if you grow up poor and you don't have a lot of books in your house and nobody's really pushing you to read, there are a hundred things that happen by the time I get a student sitting in whatever we're calling it.

What I would say is that it's more about first-generation students, it's more about poverty effects, it's more about class, it's more about students not understanding the moves of academic writing, the moves of middle class standards that we try to assimilate people to in post-secondary education. I think I want to resist that it has anything to do with their deficiency as a learner, as a thinker, as a human being. It has to do in most part with poverty affects with class, with opportunities, with previous educational experiences that end up expressing themselves on a writing test or the Accuplacer or whatever measure people are using to sort students into classes.

SW: How can institutions better support basic writing classrooms?

DJ: Supporting programs and teachers is always good and high quality professional development support for that. Absolutely. And understanding that it is a part of writing studies that it's a part of the discipline. All of that is there. I think that's really important and I think that especially in community colleges that sometimes developmental writing, based writing, instructors aren't even put on the same ... It becomes a hierarchy, right? And in some cases, you can still teach basic writing with a bachelor's degree in some places. And so you do not have actually the same level of instructor, which is always one of those great ironies that you have the least prepared students with the least prepared instructors.

To reframe that, the other thing that I would say is that the integrated student support model and what's great about my rural campus, I have a provost who believes in integrated support and I have advisors who believe in that. We have a robust early alert system. We work with the advisors, we work with students. The advisors have lots of contacts to our community resources, which might not be as robust or as many as you would have in a large metropolitan area. But our advisors work with our instructors and our students very well. I would say the really important thing for serving students well is an integrated student services model and that is integrated with

the instructor, with all of the instructors – and that requires a very different notion. There can't be disciplinary silos.

If you're taking Developmental Math 91 and English 61 and we need to be able to ... I think if you can have a cohort model or a model where the instructors all talk to one another because sometimes, whatever's going on in the student's life, they're more comfortable talking to me or they're more comfortable with another instructor. And the notion that ... I mean students obviously can come and go and they might fail and they have a right to fail. They have a right to drop out. Our emphasis on persistence and completion is really good and really noble as long as it really is about serving students and not just raising graduation numbers. And so figuring out what's best for the students. And that only happens, I think through kind of integrated services model.

SW: This is my last question and it sort of builds off of the previous one, specifically whenever you mentioned providing proper training and development for teachers. Your research focuses on preparing teachers for two-year colleges. You co-wrote the TYCA Guidelines for Preparing Teachers of English in the Two-Year College. Your dissertation was dedicated to this type of work. It was titled, "Tilting at Windmills: Refiguring Graduate Education in English to Prepare Future Two-Year College Professionals." Through all of this work, what have you learned? How can graduate programs better prepare individuals to teach at two-year colleges?

DJ: Wow, what a great question. Let's see. I think for me, when I started teaching at Metropolitan Community College in Omaha many years ago, I had a master's degree. They said, "Here, half your load is going to be basic writing and half your load is going to be first year writing. And go to it." I got into the classroom and I was very deeply unprepared for the students that I was encountering and they had lots of needs and I did not have the skills I. So my question there began with, "Well, why don't I have these skills? And then the second question is, "Well, how do I get these skills?" And so for me, I got a second master's degree in language teaching, actually concentrating in ESL. I would say that the linguistics and applied linguistics and the pedagogy classes from there began to prepare me.

But again, my traditional master's degree hadn't prepared me at all. I ended up going on and getting a doctorate while I worked at Lincoln and in comp/rhet and really wanting to study basic writing and how to help my students and then also kind of try to understand why I was so dramatically under prepared for this. And so that ended up being my dissertation project and a lot of works that I did with Susan E. Lee at Metro to develop a graduate student internship with the University of Nebraska Omaha. And also, the work I did with Christie Toth and just a whole bunch of other folks. I came to those questions by virtue of really feeling like I was not taking care of my students in an appropriate way, that I was not prepared.

The answer to what programs can do is ... it's a long answer. The first thing I'll say is that I think that we still have a lot of graduate programs, doctoral programs, in particular, that are interested in replication models and that isn't very useful. And many graduate faculty weren't really

interested in teaching at two-year colleges and they sometimes, not all the time, but sometimes still believe that if their students end up at a two-year college after they're done that that is somehow a second-place job. And I would hasten to say that it's not a second-place job. And that a full-time job at a community college is in many ways as good as a research-intensive job.

Christie Toth and I wrote an article and it's in my dissertation, too, it's about how ... where there's this cycle of forgetting. So in the 70s there was this huge boom in community colleges. Four-year schools responded by building up doctorate of arts programs. As comp/rhet rose, those doctorate of art programs went away. The DA programs were really interesting because they were terminal programs meant for teaching practitioners meant for people who really saw teaching as their end career goal. Well the DA went away. I think there's one right now in the entire United States – it's at Murray State. The degree that we had and the boom that we had, the community colleges had to make those teaching practitioners, sort of went away. It went away as part time labor, contingent labor, adjunctification took hold. It went away in part because of the rise of composition and rhetoric. And then on top of that, you had the replication model.

There are many, many reasons that we forgot about how we had prepared folks. I mean there really were some interesting programs. There was a program at the University of Iowa in the 70s that was a like a double master's degree. You got a master's degree in English. Then, you got a master's degree in pedagogy education. There were the DAs, there were a whole number of programs that were doing really cool things. They died. And they died because we came to believe that there weren't any jobs. And in part, that's true because I think 70-75% of our labor is adjunct or contingent or exploited, however you want to put that.

So there's an enormous problem and a disconnect. And then what we learned is, what I tried to think of is, what would be a way that we could start to fix that problem? The first thing that we did at Metro was we created a “graduate externship,” is what we ended up calling it, where we brought in graduate students to co-teach with an instructor at Metro for a semester in a basic writing classroom. So they got to teach and grade and plan and do all of the things. They got all of that exposure. The idea was that they would be better prepared to go and compete for full time jobs. That program, as far as I know, is still continuing. So those kinds of programs where you have graduate faculty at your institutions who are willing to partner with faculty at two-year colleges to provide learning experiences. There are lots of weird mechanisms that make that difficult, but that's a really good one.

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