

Episode 160: David Coad and Michal Reznizki

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, David Coad and Michal Reznizki talk about the dynamic activities for first year composition and how new and experienced teachers can use this book as a resource for designing and planning classroom activities.

David Coad is a college educator and scholar of digital rhetoric who teaches at Santa Clara University in California's Silicon Valley. Holding a PhD from UC Davis in education, David is interested in active learning and engaging, inclusive approaches to teaching. He also teaches various digital literacies, including critical and ethical thinking about gen AI, virtual reality, social media, and other emerging technologies. He has published in *Kairos*, *JITP*, and *Computers and Composition*.

Michal Reznizki, a scholar and educator in the field of composition studies, teaches writing at the University of California, Berkeley. Michal holds a PhD in education from the University of California, Davis. Her research focuses on teacher preparation, active learning, and the connection between high school and college writing. She has published in *Currents and Teaching and Learning* and in *College Composition and Communication*.

David and Michal, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: Your recent co-edited collection, *Dynamic Activities for First-Year Composition*, contains 96 teaching activities to help teachers plan, prepare, and implement writing instruction in college. One thing that's unique about this book is its chapters. They're short and accessible. They include mode of delivery, teacher preparation, estimated time, and a description for each activity. Each chapter also includes instructions, learning outcomes, and impressions. Can you talk more about how this book came to be and why you decided to go with this structure for the book and chapters?*

MR: Yeah, so I want to start with really the story of how the book came into being. It actually came from a struggle that I had. I started a new job at UC Berkeley and I was already a pretty experienced teacher, but after that first year, I felt like I had a challenging year and I was struggling. And my struggle was that I felt like I already had everything set up, but I felt like my class was too repetitive, not so engaging. I was doing just the same things over and over again. We read a text, group discussion, and I didn't really know how to, what should I do? I ran out of ideas. And over that summer, after my first year there, I met with David, who is a good friend of mine from grad school. And just meeting for coffee, and I said to David, "Listen, I am looking for a resource for something with a book or a resource with activities to do in the classroom because I feel like I'm running out of ideas."

David and I started looking for such a resource. We couldn't find anything. And we had so many conversation talking about how is it possible that there is nothing like that in the field? And so

that actually made us, we did the research, we were looking, looking, and decided we should just create that resource ourselves. And after many conversations and looking for other resources and what's out there, we decided that the best thing would be to collect activities from writing instructors all over the country and really see what other people are doing. So that's really the idea how the book came into being.

DC: Michal said it really well, that story is just so potent. But yeah, I wanted to answer a little bit about the other part of the question, which was basically the structure of the activities and the structure of the book. So the chapters or activities that we really wanted to be accessible and usable for instructors. So we came up with that simple structure for each activity to help instructors be able to use it readily. And so the final product is easy to read, quick to understand, and easy to implement quickly into your class. So that's what we really enjoyed about it. And then we also included the learning outcomes and impressions because we felt like they gave an idea of where these activities were coming from and how they were tied to first year composition pedagogy, which is really important.

And then when organizing the chapters into sections, we didn't really have a set structure already. We more so thought about how do the activities that we received map out. And so kind of like when you're doing qualitative research and you're coding things, we kind of just looked at them and categorized them. And so, it's a really organic structure. We realized that as we went through the activities, for instance, we had a lot of activities on genre, more than we expected. So we just made a whole section on genre. And then we made a section on visual and social media and a section on composing and revising, reading skills, teaching grammar and language. These all came out of the activities we actually received. That was just really awesome in that we felt like it really came out really well because it allows teachers to use these activities in practical ways that come directly from what people are actually doing in their classrooms.

SW: And we'll talk more about the book sections in just a bit. 96 activities. That's a lot. I'm interested in hearing about an activity from the book that you've adapted and you've used in your own writing classrooms.

MR: Yeah, so first I will say there are so many activities. I feel like right now my class is the book. So I'm really using, I think both of us are using all of the activities. One activity, one of my favorite activities, and I think also my student's favorite is called the Candy Activity. So the title is Understanding Analysis and Synthesis with Candy. And this is by Ella R. Browning. Now in this activity, I bring different types of candies to class. This semester it works well because it's around Halloween time. And so students, what they need to do is they analyze the candy. So they eat it, and then they talk in groups why they like the candy and specific questions, analyzing why the candy's so good and the texture, the taste, and so on. And after that, they need to discuss how the different candies connect to each other.

And in my class I teach, I do both analysis essay and I also do synthesis. So that works really well. Really this activity I do it at the beginning, introducing both kinds of essays. And just by doing this with candy, it's much more engaging. It's fun. A lot of students have very strong opinions about the candies. And so it's very helpful in understanding the concept, concept of analysis, concept of synthesis. And also I feel like the activity, students always mention that in

the evaluations, the Candy Activity, they remember it. And sometimes we even go back to it, and I say, "Oh, remember how when we were talking about the candies? Now you need to do that with the sources." So that has been very useful and effective.

DC: And I also did that activity last week, which was great because of Halloween and everything. But one of my favorite activities to implement from the book is the Bad Email Activity. It's called Bad Email Rhetoric by Jerry Stinnett. And for this activity, students get into groups and each group needs to write an email to the professor requesting an extension on a paper. But there's one catch, there's one really interesting piece of the instructions to this activity, which is that they need to write the worst email ever. And so this activity, it's just so engaging and what they end up with is a really lively discussion about genre conventions and just the idea of writing something really bad gets students so excited to work together and see what they can produce. And it just lights up everybody in the classroom, especially the students who maybe otherwise aren't as involved as everyone else. So yeah, the activities that we've implemented from our book into the class have just gone so swimmingly, so well, that it just really makes us believe in this book and the power of teachers sharing activities with each other.

SW: Let's talk about the audience for Dynamic Activities for First Year Composition. You mention in your introduction that this book can be an "indispensable resource for both new and experienced teachers of writing." Can you talk more about how these two different audiences can take up and use this book and how you feel like this book engages new and experienced writing teachers? I'm thinking about positionalities and how different teachers might use this book, from adjuncts to GTAs to lecturers to tenure track faculty to tenured professors.

MR: Yeah. I want to start by saying that the book is really for everyone. And I want to first address that the experience teaching teachers, because I feel like when we started working on the book, we didn't think about, "Oh, this will be good for new teachers." Both of us were mid-career, already had a lot of experience teaching, and both of us felt like we really needed that book. So I feel like in a sense, again, the idea of the book is that it's comprehensive and it's for everybody, doesn't matter which stage in your career you're at. But at the same time, I feel like especially experienced teachers who feel like, "Oh, we have everything already. I have all my lesson plans. I know what I'm doing." This is something that can help with creating more engagement, refreshing ideas. But also I feel like teaching, I mean, it's such a dynamic profession. Every semester you have a different group of students and every group of students is completely different from the previous one. So I feel like teaching is just so dynamic that you always have to come up with something that would work for that group of students.

Again, the main thing thinking about that audience is that especially for experienced teachers who think like, "Oh, we have everything. We don't need to know anything." Again, teaching is also, you could say, a profession where it's a lifelong learning, that you learn every time. And so I feel like, again, and I was an experienced teacher when we started the project with the book and I use it all the time. It's just so helpful, so nice to have new things, different activities, make the class more engaging, more participation. And it also, I can see that in my student evaluations, how using these activities help so much. The students are really looking forward to the class because they don't know what other activities we'll do, and it's very, very engaging and fun.

SW: You mentioned students. Is this a book that students could buy for a class, and it be used more like a centralized classroom text? I'm thinking about a situation where maybe the teacher wants to hear from students and wants students to pick and choose the activities they want to engage with and the learning that they want to do. Have you heard it being used in that way?

DC: That's really interesting. Yeah, I hadn't really thought of that very much. I think as far as how it's been used so far, it's mostly been used by, as far as we know, instructors, both high school instructors and college instructors. And it's also been assigned as a text to many practicum courses for grad students who are teaching for the first time. It's very useful for them. But, yeah, as far as in the first year writing classroom, we haven't really thought of it that way. It might be a little meta, but it would be interesting to see. So maybe somebody might try that out and see how it goes. The idea of, "Here's an activity. What are you learning from it? And let's do it together." But I did want to talk, did you want to say something else, Michal?

MR: I just wanted to respond to that question. When the book came out last semester, I shared that with my students and I actually brought the book and students were looking at activities. I feel like, again, the book, as David was saying, is mostly for teachers. It's a, as you were saying, a pedagogy book to plan the class. I think when I saw students engaging with, it's just how to plan activities. I did have some students who looked over and said, "Oh, this looks fun. That looks interesting." So they wanted to try it and then made me actually try a new activity that I never tried before, which is Walk with Writing. I tried it because the students ask to do that. So I feel like it's mostly for teachers.

DC: I just wanted to respond a little bit about the new instructors using this book. And I remember myself when I was a new instructor, just how challenging it is to prepare lesson plans from scratch and the pace of teaching and coming up with enough activities to fill class time in a meaningful, productive way rather than just throwing something together. It takes a ton of emotional energy and time for new instructors. And so I just feel like this book is great hands-on, tried and used, ready to use activities, that instructors can put into their classes and it saves a ton of time and stress when preparing new activities for those instructors who just have so much on their plate and don't know exactly how to organize, how to develop these activities yet. But it also, one last thing is it helps new teachers get ideas of how to teach concepts that maybe they don't know how to teach yet and gets them more confident in that and more confident in how to develop their own activities as well.

SW: This is my last question. The book is divided into nine sections. Was there an idea for a section that didn't make the final version that you thought about including in the early stages, one that maybe you had in mind during the planning and proposal stage, or is there a section that you would add to a second edition based on conversations with teachers who are using your book now?

MR: Yeah, so to answer your question, the answer is no. And as I mentioned before, really the sections came out of the activity. So, we really didn't plan for anything. I mean, we knew there will probably be a section about genre and one on social media. But we didn't want to come with a set kind of a mindset that, "Oh, we only need these sections." So we didn't have any sections that we didn't include in the book, however, we did have one section that we ended up creating

that we didn't expect. And so when we got all the activities, we categorized them, we had all the sections, everything was perfect. And then we had about a dozen activities that didn't fit into any of the sections. And so instead of taking it out, what we decided to do is actually to include this. And we call that, this is the last section, it's called Thrilling Ways to Think Outside the Curriculum because it felt like the activities didn't belong anywhere because they were miscellaneous in a way. And so these activities are really different things that writing instructors are doing. There is an activity about titles, like a title auction, and that one that I mentioned, the Walk with Writing where students go out and take a walk to do some brainstorming. And, again, we wanted the book to be comprehensive and to include everything, so we're really glad that we included that section.

DC: And the really interesting thing about that additional section was that as it was going through peer review, the book was going through peer review, one of the reviewers said, "Oh, this thinking outside the curriculum section is my favorite section and it's so cool." And it was really surprising to hear that, that something that we expected to be kind of miscellaneous ended up being really meaningful and helpful to folks to think outside of the regular curriculum and see what else they can do in their class. And then to answer the last part of your question there about a second edition and other sections we might include, of course if we produce a second edition, we would want to include something on generative AI because of how important that is right now for our field and for developing critical thinking about that in first year composition. All of that happened right as the book was coming out basically, so it's something we would love to include in the second edition.

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