Episode 31: David F. Green, Jr.
Transcript

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

Pedagogue is committed to facilitating conversations that move across institutions and positions. So from grad students to junior faculty to emerti. From community colleges to private universities. From Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). Pedagogue attempts to amplify voices. It's a space for teachers to talk about teaching and to talk about writing. Pedagogue is dedicated to building a supportive community that celebrates the work we do as teachers in our local sites, programs, and classrooms, and outside our classrooms.

I want to highlight different local sites and locations where teaching writing happens. And I think what's really important here is the localization of these conversations. Community colleges should not be homogenized. HSIs and HBCUs should not be homogenized. Each institution is complex. So one of the goals of this podcast is to bring in different teacher-scholars working and teaching at different institutional sites to help show these complexities and nuances.

In this episode, I talk with David F. Green, Jr. about teaching at Howard University, a private, research HBCU in Washington, D.C., we talk about writing program administration, writing assessment, labels attached to language standards, African American rhetoric and hip hop.

David F. Green, Jr. is Director of the Writing Program and Associate Professor of English at Howard University. He remains committed to serving historically underrepresented students and theorizing rhetoric and composition practice with an emphasis on race and difference. Dr. Green is also the editor of *Visions and Cyphers*, a writing studies textbook composed with an emphasis on culture and racialized language research in composition studies. He has published several articles on race, writing, assessment, and critical language use. His research interests include Hip Hop, African American rhetoric, Writing Program Administration, and Emancipatory Composition studies. David is currently the secretary for the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

David, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I want to start by talking about Howard. Howard University is a private, research HBCU in Washington, D.C., the home of over 9,000 students. Howard also has a notable list of alumni, including Toni Morrison and Thurgood Marshall. Talk to me about Howard University and what it's like to teach there? In what ways do the traditions at Howard impact the writing classroom, and how does this also affect your work as a writing program administrator (WPA)?

DG: So as you mentioned, there's this long legacy, this strong Black intellectual traditional at Howard, and you can really feel it when you come on campus, and when you're in the

classrooms. I teach in Alain Locke Hall, the first African American Rhodes Scholar, and one of the major stalwarts of the Harlem Renaissance. Sterling Brown is one of the main architects for my department, the English department. He's often cited. His work is shared around the classes and what we do, and it's also integrated into a lot of the programs. And so the tradition is kind of always there in ways that I find very refreshing, in part because it gives it a different model of how we might think about some of these disciplines. And so when I begin to think about what should a writing class look like in this space at this institution for these students that want that kind of tradition, I often begin with what conversations are relevant to these students who are predominantly Black, but also for these students who come from a variety of walks of life.

We have a large international population. Students come from Ethiopia and Egypt. They come from Nigeria. We have a large population of Caribbean students, students from Jamaica and Trinidad. And so you have this international mix of students, as well as there are white students, there are Hispanic students. And so you have this very, very diverse population in which whiteness is not necessarily centered. When we begin to talk about tradition and we talk about even just certain rhetorical practices in the classroom, students come to expect something extra or something that connects them or connects us to that lineage. And so even on our syllabi, and when we come to talk about the program, you'll see those kinds of references and those kinds of scholars. Toni Morrison is always present in many of the works we do, as well as a host of other writers, and thinkers, and intellectuals working in that tradition.

And so I found it very fun, especially when I first got to Howard, because it allowed me to be flexible in ways that I hadn't thought about before, meaning instead of simply focusing just on the text, bringing music into class is understood as vital and important. It's a part of many of our ceremonial traditions, it's a part of many of our intellectual talks that occur on campus, and so students are geared for it. And so it allows us to think and work in very multimodal ways. And so I enjoyed that. I appreciated that. Working as a WPA has been interesting as well. Because of tradition, faculty have been very receptive to some of the changes that I've made or argued for. They've been very receptive to rethinking stances on Black English or other language practices, even terms like translingualism or linguistic difference have been central to how we've started to think about what our program should be for today's student or for the modern university. And so it's been exciting in that sense.

Outside of just the WPA work in the writing program itself, we have a host of other kinds of programs, as I mentioned, like the Sterling Brown Society, and students have writing cyphers, and other kinds of programs in which they come to display their writing in various forms, whether it's poetry, reflective memoir writing, rap, or even just essay or traditional essays writing. They've come to see it much more dynamically as a part of their lives, and I appreciate and enjoy that. I think I have to give credit to our faculty for that.

SW: So I want to read something from your article, "Expanding the Dialogue on Writing Assessment at HBCUs." It's an absolutely wonderful article. Here's the passage: "Even at HBCUs where Black English traditions flow through ceremonies, social events, and sports

culture (see any HBCU homecoming), classroom discourse focuses on normative standards for writing. In other words, HBCUs push students toward social justice goals within the institutional context while also pulling them toward certain dominant, white language norms within classrooms." I love this article and I find this particular passage really interesting, so I want to hear more about this dynamic relationship, this kind of push and pull that you're talking about here. How do students at Howard respond to this tension between social justice and white discourse?

DG: I think that has been one of the more interesting questions that I had came to as a writing program administrator when I first got to Howard, in part because the students themselves are pretty much free. I think Howard is a place that emboldens and kind of bolsters students to really cultivate and think about their identities in relationship to their learning and in relationship to the curriculum. And so students are always having a kind of push pull relationship with the curriculum itself. As they should, and as we all do, we pick up certain things that we find valuable, and hopefully we can put down certain things that do damage to our expressive identities, to how we think about ourselves, to maybe any insecurities we may have about our language practices. And so I've been very proud of how students have pushed back on some of the invisible, or I use the word traditional, or normative practices that go along with a writing program. Say maybe an outsized emphasis on certain grammatical learning practices, or as other scholars in the field refer to it, skill and drill.

Students take what they can, but as I mentioned, they're still very interested in their cyphers, they're still going to produce their raps, they're still going to speak Black English. You'll find fashion shows representing Afropolitanism, a term that I didn't come to until I got to Howard, and it's like oh, okay. So you are featuring your Black identity, but you're also aware of all these other identities out there and how they may influence you. And I think that's a great metaphor for the university, but also for the writing program itself, and so I value that. I think it was the work of the teachers that we needed to begin to rethink some of these invisible assumptions and some of these entrenched beliefs about what is good writing or what it takes to produce good writing. What are we doing to our students' linguistic identities, but for the most part, students have been dynamic, resilient, energized, and they've energized me for the most part.

And I think you'll find them kind of putting pressure on some of this tension in the classes. Students will ask questions about certain readings. Students will begin to question certain grammatical formations and certain linguistic performances. When I first got here, the idea of "shade" and how shade was kind of used, an African American term that meant throwing critique or providing a subliminal critique or subliminal dis of an idea or something of that nature, but you find it in their work. They're referencing how W. E. B. Du Bois was throwing shade at Booker T. Washington, or how in this essay, I see the author is providing or throwing shade on this idea or this concept, and just well, what do you do with that? It's not like they're linguistically wrong.

And so we've had to readjust our thinking to that norm. If students want to express themselves in this way, and in a way that is critical and critically rich, how do we help them do that in a way that supports their identities, but also the rhetorical choices they will have to make out in the real world. And so it's kind of interesting. It was looking at how students respond to these tensions was what first drew me to the question, and then it became well, how should teachers respond to those tensions as they appear in ways that better help students become the dynamic forces that we hope will be once they leave the university?

SW: How do you mentor teachers or work with instructors to resist this pull toward white language norms in writing classes?

DG: I think the faculty has to want to do this, first and foremost. They have to maybe also have observed or see an issue with some of these tensions that rise in the classroom, first and foremost. And I applaud the writing faculty at Howard greatly because they were very receptive. We began with a series of conversations, conversations about language, but also about how a writing program works and what ultimately we hope to do for students. And one of the first conversations was, after students leave our classroom, we have no control over how they will use language, how they will take some of our concepts and apply them in their other classrooms, or how they may see these concepts applied in their future professions or future work. And so what we want to do best is just provide them with the best information, but also strategies and techniques that we can, that will help them be the best version of them that they can be.

And so the conversation really began there, and a series of allowing writing faculty to ask questions, to try to bring in research. We've also invited certain guest speakers to come in and speak about Black English, and so on and so forth. Bonnie Williams-Farrier came to talk to our program about various aspects of Black English, also how Black English works rhetorically, and I think that did a whole lot to show just how complex this can be, but the other thing I think she did very well was also talk about how novices or people first coming to this topic or concept of multiple Englishes or linguistic diversity as it appears in writing, how they can apply this in very unique and simplistic ways. One way is to begin rethinking some of our assumptions about how grammar works, rather than a static understanding of grammar and grammatical notions. What does it mean to begin to talk to students about grammars, and what that means, and showing them how different Englishes are rule-based and how they work?

And so that was a huge step for us to begin other conversations about our grading policies and practices. I think a year or two later, we ended up revising the rubric that we use, one, to shift the language that we have around the grammatical section, but also to begin thinking about how we value style, how we begin to think about rhythm as a part of style, how we also begin to think about certain vernacular expressions and how they may enhance style. And so it's been a lot of work. I think we've come a long way. I think we have a much longer way to go, but if anybody ever asked, I would say it begins with having conversations with your faculty, but also a willingness on your faculty's part to begin to rethink assumptions that they long held that have been taught. I know I picked up certain things in my graduate program, as great as it was, that

reinforced certain traditional notions about writing, and that just no longer seem to hold the same weight when I look at student writing today and what they can do.

SW: So your response sort of makes me think about how we can reimagine traditional assessment practices or rubrics that might emphasize "grammar" or some standardized notion of English and replace those elements with notions and concepts labelled, for example, rhythm or tempo or cadence, which offers more flexibility and elasticity with language. These terms are obviously connected to musicality. You incorporate African American rhetoric and hip hop into your writing classes. Can you talk about what that looks like?

DG: And so for me, hip hop comes out of African American rhetoric. It's become a global phenomenon, and many people from various rhetorical traditions can lay claim to hip hop because of the forms, because of rap, because of production, because of dance style and dress, but its beginning and its roots, for me really comes out of the African American rhetorical tradition, the idea of signifying, playing with language, the way folks have employed call and response in a variety of ways, how we even begin to think about communities and collectives, and the cyphers that form out of that. So what I do different, and I think where my research diverges from maybe traditional hip hop studies work, is that I'm very invested in what hip hop offers us in how we think about composing, as we've just discussed. How does it offer new concepts that are fresh that allow us to begin to think about terms that we use, like multimodal, or begin to think about multi-medium writing in very dynamic and different ways.

Adam Banks mentioned this in his book, *Digital Griots*, but what does it mean if we think about our students as DJs of a tradition, or if we think about ourselves, as scholars, as DJs of a tradition. If we're always pulling on these various discourses to help people either understand or interpret different types of information, we're really architects, and what does it do to move back and forth between the past and the present in very dynamic ways. And for me, in terms of the classroom, this often takes a variety of different forms. And so I don't just teach say a particular rap artist or particular rap songs, although I find that work valuable, getting a deeper understanding of how certain rappers perform the tradition, but I'm always interested in the conversation in placing maybe older texts or older questions, right up against newer questions or newer texts.

How does the work of Black Thought speak to the work of Ernest Gaines? Or how might we rethink say a CCCC Chair's Address by Victor Villanueva or Gwen Pough in relation to what Lauryn Hill says, in more current moments, Megan Thee Stallion. So how do we place these folks in conversations in ways that are productive for students? Not just so they can engage or talk about their favorite artists, but how does this create a substantive conversation that we can build on and that can help students gather a new understanding about how rhetoric functions, but also how they may rethink their own compositions in relation to what they've seen, or heard, or discussed in class.

SW: What are some questions you've been asking here recently about social and educational inequalities? And what kinds of directions are you being drawn to?

DG: My questions haven't changed so much, and I think that's the work of many scholars working around race and issues of equity as well. We've been talking about this stuff, we've been having these conversations, as April Baker-Bell mentions in her latest work, *Linguistic Justice*. These things have been occurring. And what I've begun to ask is well, now that there's increased attention around these issues, how can we bring to light some of the more visible and pernicious forms of discrimination that occur without us even just noticing or thinking about how do we get people to move beyond a kind of uncritical relationship to tradition to begin to think about why we need to open up access, and what it really involves, and what it really allows if we do these things. As I mentioned, having those long conversations with instructors around Black English, or even just certain assumptions that we have about what makes good writing or good reading for students.

And so we begin to think about well, why are the majority of texts that are selected, why do they come from particular authors? What does this say about how we view writing, or what we're teaching students about writing, and so on and so forth. But then it also asks us to rethink at an administrative and an institutional level the ways that language often either aligns or hides certain practices or forms of discrimination. And that's really what my interest has been most recently, but I think this connects beautifully to what people are doing in the community, how people are also thinking about social justice in very visceral forms. It all comes back to how are certain forms of discrimination damaging the development of our youth, either through fear, or concern, or having to hide certain parts of your identity for fear of retribution, or for fear of being excluded or excised just because you are who you are.

And so that's really where my thinking has been going the last couple of years, specifically with regards to rhetoric and how people use language to persuade, to cajole, to inform, to question, and so on and so forth. We've been doing this kind of work, but it requires an even increased spotlight. So that's been the next question is how do we begin to spotlight these things, not only in our scholarship, but also in our teaching, but even in the requests and demands that we make of our administration, of our chairs or deans? What kind of resources, what kinds of collaborations may be possible between universities, between certain programs, between certain ways of thinking? I'd really like us to push the envelope forward in that way. And I've had some discussions with Scott Wible at the University of Maryland, and beginning to think about what that relationship could look like.

I've had conversations with a variety of other scholars, Christine V. Cedillo, Tamika Carey, a variety of folks just to begin talking about well, what is it that we can do both inside and outside of the university to help people begin to just find their voices, but also begin to think about very, very critically some of these, as I mentioned, very pernicious forms of discrimination. I often steal a quote from an activist out here in D.C. He works for Words Beats & Life, a hip hop actvist organization, Mazi Mutafa, but he says, "How do we begin to think about how we do

good better?" And that always rings with me. How do we do good for our students, and for ourselves, and for our administration, and for our universities? How do we do good better?

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