

Episode 72: Elisabeth Kinsey

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode I talk with Elisabeth Kinsey about online pedagogy, increasing student engagement, adult learners, and taking a creative writing approach to teaching composition.

Elisabeth Kinsey is a teacher of all things literary and writerly. She hails from San Jose, California, a grand-daughter of Italian and Jewish immigrants and has lived all over the west and southwest. She received her PhD from University of Denver in literary studies. Other fields of study include: creative nonfiction and memoir, female growth narratives, from Early Modern Englishwomen's writing and the female rogue to current hybrid narratives. She feels it important to attend to the individual need in any given course. Through pedagogical approaches based on "heart," she practices Peter Elbow's workshop and Stephen Brookfield's feedback loops, attending to various learning styles.

Elisabeth, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You've been teaching online for over ten years. What's your overarching online teaching philosophy, or what do you value and why?

EK: Well, first of all, I think the shocking aspect of teaching online for ten years is that it actually hasn't really changed a lot and that's shocking only because this technological age. The approach is more of that human approach. So it's the human behind the technology that's really important, and it's what I value, and it's what students value regardless of their age. I teach a lot of mixed classes, so adult students and traditional students. Over the ten years, I would say just being present and transparent are my major values going into any online classroom.

And I've taught via, gosh, way back when it was called Angel, but then we switched to Blackboard and then Moodle, Canvas, D2L which is now I believe, Brightspace. All of those offer similar opportunities to engage with students technologically. But I guess, it's that first three weeks of any class that's really key in just establishing presence, unpacking your personality in a visceral way. So, in my first big announcement, it's kind of very jazz hands, there are a lot of GIFs and fun illustrations of the mood of the first week. I try to conceptualize the goals and the outcomes in pictures and in audio. I try to bring this haptic sense, making a flat world into a more 3D world.

So, for example, a big stress...and this is part of my goal in teaching literature and reading, a big stress is close reading and distant reading and these concepts. So, I had a GIF of "Grover Near and Far," and going near and far, and one of my students reached out, "Thank you so much for posting Grover. It made me feel so much better to engage and to be relaxed because I'm so

scared, I'm coming back to school after all these years and Grover just welcomed me.” So, it's things like that, that I think reach out past their flat screen and engage students.

SW: So thinking about your student demographics, specifically the makeup of your classes being adult learners and traditional students, what strategies do you use to increase engagement within both those populations through online teaching and learning?

EK: Well, that's a really good question. What I've seen with adult students is they want to self-direct, they really want to apprehend the subject and apply it to their lives, bring their lived experiences into the subject, especially in my non-fiction creative writing classes, those can be very intimate. So they want to put themselves out there so that they can gain so much more. And I like to rely on adult students.

Some teachers might say, “Well, I don't want to require the discussion responses too quickly, because then other students will copy each other.” Why not? Why not let them copy one another? That's embodiment, that's jumping into someone else's posts, positioning themselves in there, and then explaining it and synthesizing someone else's post. So the adult students can write these mammoth posts that bring in theory and bring in the class concepts, and then the traditional students can borrow from them and model how it feels to actually apply theory.

I think it's actually a bit of plagiarism, maybe some teachers would call that in the discussion. That's fine. I embrace it because then the traditional learners will get that enriched experience. I've had those learners go on in other classes and then not rely on the other adult students so much. That's a strategy, to rely on the adult students' experience and to lean on them a little. I have a lot of adults who reach out to me and say, “Oh my gosh, I'm so glad you're this kind of teacher, who is open to learning because I've been out of school for so long,” and blahdy-blah.

And then I'll return their email or I'll return their call and say, “I'm relying on you to model this experience that you have.” They're happy to do it. They're so excited to author their education, and then it trickles down, so that's kind of a way that I increased student engagement. And then, another one is adding options to the content. If you're flexible in your classroom and you see that some people, some students, are running behind or need more encouragement, you can shape the assignments and allow more drafts. Why not? Of course, it makes it harder a little bit, to manage all the moving pieces. But if you tell students, “Look, I want you to rewrite this and I'm not going to penalize you. I would like a new draft with these aspects,” and students embrace that. They love to have options, especially to improve right there and apply that improvement.

SW: All of us have had to navigate online teaching and learning over the past year and we've had to really consider scholarship and best practices. For some of us, maybe many of us, this work is new. Are there any current trends you would like to see continuing, and then, perhaps maybe trends that you find troublesome or problematic?

EK: I mean, you've interviewed a lot of faculty who support that universal design for learning framework, which is basically making your online classroom accessible for all learner types. I mean, I can't emphasize that enough. When I do have the freedom to post in a class, the multiple intelligences test, I try to gather that information and make sure that all of my classes are universally accessible to all kinds of learners. When there are those advisor positions, in the structure of the school, I try to work closely with advisors to manage student learning styles. So there's that.

Going forward, I have some students who are extremely auditory or visual, so I try to address that, but there's some worrisome emphasis placed on gamification, and I just attended a conference about gamification, and I'm all for it. I love games. I think that games are really important for that engagement piece because they allow for students to play and then make these giant leaps. But I guess, my biggest worry is that we're going to emphasize gamification and de-emphasize the sustained practices that are needed in writing. We need to be readers. We need to keep reading novels. Should I repeat that?

And so, I'm writing an article right now about digital humanities and it is against the idea of distant reading, not against it, but talking to it. And Franco Moretti's *Distant Reading* is standing back and embracing text mining and graphs and charts, and taking a temperature of the themes of several texts. It's placing emphasis on data coming from our novels and what we value as literature in the world. Johanna Drucker is kind of in the middle of this conversation. I just saw her last year and she wrote *Graphesis*. She's a fantastic scholar that I just love.

Anyway, she talks about this interpreter position. I love that we are still interpreters, we are readers, writers. And so I'm worried about chunking out novels, Manga-izing them, and catering to that as we move forward in online classes. What are we catering to? What are we emphasizing? Can we also keep that sustained practice? These are some of my worries and questions and considerations as we move forward in the online platform. We need to read novels. What does that look like?

SW: So you're a creative writer. I'm interested in how you bring this background into the composition classroom and what that looks like? What are the affordances of taking a creative writing approach to teaching composition?

EK: Well, I definitely love those two areas to speak to one another and I believe that we are going towards a creative approach to composition, but maybe that's just in my small world. I've been looking for texts, I found one...because I am actually about to write a curriculum that's creative non-fiction and rhetoric. I just found a text, it is called *The Art of Creative Research: A Field Guide for Writers* by Philip Gerard. I'm sure there are a lot more, *This Time It's Personal* by [John S.] O'Connor.

I'm just starting to write this, but I taught with creative writing in the composition classroom for ten years. When students can recognize an argument in a creative work, they're disarmed, all of a

sudden they realize that, oh, they didn't have all these sources and they didn't do a bibliography and they didn't have to say, "This is ethos, and this is pathos, and this is my rhetorical strategy." All of that is melted away and they're left with story, and it just ignites them. It gets them excited again about rhetoric so that they can reenter it with more of a conceptual feel and they can come from that part of the brain that plays and they jump, they make these strides, "Oh, well, I have a lot of issues and problems in my world, and I need to tell that story."

Coming from a perspective in story is so important. They can reach into their lives and then apply them. Once they've recognized the tools in say...there's an essay that I use a lot, that is, it's David Sedaris' "Remembering my Childhood In Africa," where it's actually his partner's childhood in Africa that he tells about. And it's a compare and contrast essay where his boring life in comparison to Hugh's, growing up, their field trip was to a slaughterhouse in Africa and his was to a colonial town. So there is this tension within the essay and students can pick out the structure of rhetoric within this story and within their lives.

It's extremely empowering for students to reposition themselves in the middle of argumentation and see it in a creative way. And that way, they're not approaching the rhetoric in this kind of scientific structure, they're coming in through a creative backdoor, and it's terribly empowering. I guess, I'm being repetitive, but I think it's my favorite way to approach composition, and I've had lots of success with it. In fact, even last night, the students said, "Oh, I'm so glad I don't have to cite everything." And citing gets in the way. If you can play for a while, then you can get to the citations and have energy for them.

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