Episode 107: Eric Detweiler
Transcript

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

In this episode, Eric Detweiler talks about digital rhetoric and media, teaching video games and podcasting, assessing multimodal assignments, and his forthcoming book titled Responsible Pedagogy.

Eric Detweiler is an assistant professor in the English Department at Middle Tennessee State University, where he's also helping develop a new undergraduate degree in Public Writing and Rhetoric. His research and teaching focuses on writing pedagogy, rhetorical theory, digital media, and the intersections between those things. He hosts a podcast called Rhetoricity, and his first book, Responsible Pedagogy: Moving Beyond Authority and Mastery in Higher Education, will be published by Penn State University Press in late 2022. You can find out more about his work at RhetEric.org.

Eric, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your teaching and research interests include digital rhetoric and media. How does digital rhetoric inform your understanding and approach to teaching writing?

ED: Yeah, for sure. And I'll say before I launch in, I'm absolutely delighted to be here as well. I think we've got a little bit of a mutual admiration society going on here. So thanks for having me. The answer to that question comes down a little bit to sort of what drew me to rhetoric and writing studies in the first place, which was an appreciation for its attention to the way that writing works in the everyday world and in sort of everyday genres. I'm sure, like a lot of people who have PhDs in English, I grew up reading a lot of novels, reading a lot of fiction, but it was really the study of just how communication and writing works in everyday life that really got me interested in this field in the first place, from classroom and sort of academic communication to digital genres.

So in my mind, when you're talking about and working with students with regard to that kind of writing, it's really hard not to think about digital technology a little bit at this point, because there's so few genres, types of writing that aren't inflected in some way by digital technology. Even if they're writing and you're teaching students to write fairly conventional academic genres, 3000-word essays with a list of citations at the end or whatever; so much of the teaching that I end up doing is like, here's how you set margins in Microsoft Word. Here's how to insert page numbers, stuff like that.

But just more broadly speaking, I mean, I think that is something that is inextricable from so many of our writing practices and the writing practices that students will be doing, are interested in doing, and so on and so forth, from first year students up through students who are taking sort

of upper-level English and writing classes. In the classroom, when I'm talking to students about writing, I'm often talking about digital rhetoric in terms of having them think about who would the audiences be for the kinds of writing that you do in the world?

And this could be stuff like, when you're thinking about how you caption an Instagram post or stuff that they're doing outside of academic contexts to if you were constructing in the future academic or professional documents, like how would they circulate? How would you be thinking about what audiences might come to them? Not just through the supervisor you submit it to, or the teacher that you turn it into, but the way that it would move through the world in part, because of digital technologies and how it would be structured.

Anything from the multimodal aspects of a paper, other media you might bring in, all of the stuff that goes into that kind of creative process. There's just so much there to me that you just can't take off the table, it's this point. And so, just trying to help students both get excited about writing by going like, we can think about it in terms of these digital platforms and technologies that you are already well versed in some cases and not so well versed in others at using. But also that are just, I think, practically speaking really important factors and sort of vectors to think about with communication and with the kinds of writing that they're doing.

SW: I know some of your teaching also focuses on video games and podcasting, and I'm interested in hearing how you incorporate podcasts in your writing classroom and what you would say are some of the affordances in using video games and podcasts to teach first-year writing?

ED: Yeah, for sure. Yeah, that's a great question. Thanks for asking that. I guess, I'll move through the curriculum and a couple of different courses a little bit, because there's sort of different answers to that question in different contexts and in different classes that I teach. I mean, I think one of maybe the most, I don't know, straightforward modular ways that I do that with podcasting is in first-year writing classes. So, for example, this coming spring, I'll be teaching the second of our two semester first-year writing sequence that we have at MTSU. I incorporate a decent number of podcast episodes into that course, as like course "readings," course listenings, whatever you want to call them. I should mention an eye to accessibility, making sure I'm assigning podcasts that have transcripts and materials for students who need or would like that.

One of the things that I will get into with students as we begin listening to some of those podcast episodes in that class, and as they begin working on the writing projects that they're doing for the course is the difference between writing for the ear, writing something that is primarily meant to be heard, and writing something that is primarily meant to be read whether on the screen or on a printed page. Because I think there's very different types of writing that work well in those two environments. Even if you take an example, like if you read a lot of podcasting or radio manuals that are talking about how do you script for radio segments or something like that.

You want such shorter sentences. Take out all of those clauses, take out all of those periodic sentences in a lot of cases, not a universal rule, of course, but to make it a little bit easier for a listener who can't easily just flip back to the last page or scroll back up the screen to be able to follow along and not get lost in a long sentence.

I've done activities in the past where basically once students have some sense of podcasting since you've still got a lot of students who come to college not really familiar with podcasts or if they are familiar with them with very sort of open-ended discussion podcasts that aren't scripted. But once they're familiar with that, I'll ask them to take a little chunk of a project that they're working on and write two versions of it. One that is meant to be read and one that is meant to be listened to. And what that allows in the class, even if it's just a one-day one-off exercise, is to try to get students thinking about the sort of rhetorical factors that go into writing. When you're thinking about, as I mentioned already, who your audience is, how they're going to take something in, how it's meant to be sort of processed and encountered.

And that that's so different when you're writing for podcasting versus when you're writing for a written essay or something like that. My hope there is that I can start to get students who, I think, especially in first-year classes, I don't know if this is common experience, but I feel like there's often not a sense of context or audience for the writing they're doing for their courses. They just feel like this is all very abstract. There's this set of five-paragraph rules, I follow, but it's more about following those rules than it is thinking about audience and effective and engaging communication. I think once they start to do a little bit of comparison between those two media, I can start to go, okay, now, notice here's what's actually working well when you are writing even a very conventional academic essay. This isn't just the plain, unmarked, boring style of writing where you have no style, no personality, no conventions that you're following.

They're there. It's just very different than what you might get in a context like podcasting. And then, when I'm moving further along in the curriculum, I've been able very fortunately a few times to teach a full-fledged special topics course that's focused on essentially podcasting thinking about the rhetorical affordances of recorded sound, how that diverges from, or sort of overlaps with the possibilities of written text. And one of the things that I get really excited about there is I think of myself as, this is maybe a little odd, but sort of first and foremost, a rhetoric person with no insult intended to anybody who identifies more with writing studies or composition or other kinds of key terms in the field. But for me, what that's meant in a lot of ways is having a little bit of a foot in the rhetoric side of communication studies and the sort of speech communication tradition that that field has often had. One foot in the English sort of more writing focused side of rhetoric and writing studies.

One of the things that I get really excited about in that podcasting class is I think it's a great place to sort of bring those two together. There's this odd way that lots of people have documented very thoroughly that speech communication and written communication got split off from each other in the way that they're now hosted in universities in the US. But I think it's a really cool place to begin to bring those back together and help students think about when you've got writing

that's meshed with other kinds of spoken words, other kinds of oral presentation, what are the rhetorical possibilities there? And so that class really moves students through a series of exercises where they're both writing and planning audio projects and learning to do the production work and the oral delivery work that's involved there, building all the way up to a collaborative podcast series that the entire class creates together. That's the capstone for that course.

I'll pivot into video games, which is an odd and different answer, which is even less than podcasting, which at least I've been doing for about a decade now. I did not anticipate video games being a part of my teaching career back when I was playing Sonic the Hedgehog in 1995 or whatever. Honestly, we have a special topics Gen Ed course that we offer here that's a literature course. That's one of the only literature courses that I teach. But basically shortly after I got to MTSU, I looked at the listings of all the different topics that people were teaching and there's some great topics people offer. We've got disability literature courses; we've got environmentalism and literature, all kinds of different stuff. And I was like, okay, what can I add that will be somewhat unique to this list? And I was like, I'll do a video games class.

So that's been a little bit more of a way of getting students in that Gen Ed context to think about narrative, think about how interactive media, interactive fiction, video games more specifically, speak to and add new things into the mix when it comes to theorizing narrative, theorizing stories, thinking about what makes them tick in the way that English studies has long done. And then I've taught once a more rhetorically focused, upper-level version of a video games course where we were thinking a little bit more about sort of the cultural impact and reach of video games, which I mean, from economics, to politics, to culture. I mean, it's just influencing so many arenas of life.

I think in ways that some people are very much aware of and some people may not be. So getting students to sort of write about video games a little bit more in terms of sort of cultural criticism and things like that. Then in all those courses, I tend to make a lot of use of an interactive storytelling tool called Twine, which is just like a digital choose-your-own adventure that students can build without really much background in computer programming or anything like that. And again, just getting students in both those courses to start thinking about what is writing, even in the broader framework of a fairly academically focused course start to look like as it circulates in the world, as you're starting to work with interactive media, work with the kinds of technologies that drive a lot of writing both in and beyond their classes and their future professional trajectories.

There's a ton of stuff that I have posted on my website in terms of teaching resources, if anybody's interested in digging into this stuff more, and that is just "RhetEric," sorry for the bad pun, but that's just rhetoric with an "E" where the "O" would be as in Eric: rheteric.org/teaching. I've got a bunch of syllabi and a bunch of exercises and sort of assignment prompts there. If folks are interested in digging into that a little bit more.

SW: How do you assess video or audio-based projects?

ED: Another great question. Yeah, and something that I'm constantly reworking and trying to do better at. But I will say, I was very fortunate that pretty early in my teaching career, I was able to start adopting what might fall under the broad heading of ungrading frameworks in my classes. So there's a system called the Learning Record. If anybody's interested in reading more about that, you can just go to learningrecord.org. One of the people who is really involved in sort of adapting that and sort of establishing its relevance for higher education in particular was Peg Syverson, who was a faculty member at the University of Texas when I was there for my PhD work.

I taught while I was there in the digital writing and research lab, which is a research lab, but also partnered with some computer classrooms that we had on campus, where we were able to teach since we were working in that lab with a real encouragement and push to have students that were taking classes in those rooms do a lot of multimodal sort of digitally intensive projects, to make use of the skill sets we were developing as graduate students who were staffing that lab, as well as the sort of technology that was very fortunately for us at our disposal in those classrooms.

But as you know, I'm sure you're aware given some of your interest in multi-modality, as soon as you start to get into those kinds of projects, it becomes so much more challenging to develop any kind of standardized rubric or framework that will speak to every iteration of the different kinds of projects that students might do. I think there's a lot of really cool frameworks in the field for that kind of thing. Like Jody Shipka's work in *Toward a Composition Made Whole*, that book provides some really cool ways to help students think about their goals, think about their choices on those kinds of projects, all that to say that the framework that we were encouraged and allowed, which is an amazing opportunity as a graduate student to use was the Learning Record, which is much more driven by reflection that students are doing on the work that's happening in their projects.

That is much more focused in the way that it was typically deployed at UT on having students get a lot of qualitative feedback from the instructor along the way, in a course, and not so much quantitative grades, and then sort of make the case for the work that they'd done and the grade that they had achieved in the course in some reflective writing that they'd done. It was very evidence based, tied to going like, if you look back at these projects, here's what you can see me learning to do, or how I'm developing in terms of the learning objectives for this course and so on and so forth. And so that's been something that's been with me for a really long time. And what that tends to look like for me now is at the beginning of the class, we spend a lot of time talking about the course outcomes, the learning objectives, not in a super dogmatic way. But just like, this is what this course is meant to help you learn to do.

And based on that, students write a statement of goals. They are like, based on these objectives, here's what I want to accomplish in this course. There's some elements that sort of resemble contract grading, but there's maybe a little bit more of an emphasis on how am I going to move

through this course and sort of what work am I going to do? And then at the midterm in the final students write a self-evaluation where, based on some pretty detailed grading criteria that I've developed for that course, they say, here is the grade that I'm arguing for in this class at this point. And here's the evidence that I've got to back that up. So it's not based on the quantitative grade they have achieved on past projects. It's based on contextualizing their work in terms of what they've learned, including things where they've really beefed it, things where they did not come into the class with the super strong knowledge of the technology that they're working with.

And just being able to account for the work that they've done and sort of talked me through it. And what that's allowed, especially in the podcasting class is, if I've got one student who's an English major, really interested in being a creative writer, might have lots of writing experience, but mostly in the realm of fiction or poetry. And then I've got another student who is coming from MTSU's recording industry program, which is a pretty well-known program, which means they're probably coming in with better audio production skills than I will ever have, but not necessarily a huge interest in writing. With both those students I could sort of assess the work that they're doing on their own terms and based on sort of where they start and how they're moving through the course, not based on one student having really beautiful audio production, but just starting out in terms of learning to script and another student who is opening an audio editor for the first time in their life, but might really have a lot of experience with how to get words on the page.

So that's been my main thing, using the Learning Record has really, I think, opened up a lot of cool sort of pedagogical opportunities and experimentations for me and has been a way I can give my students a lot more room to maneuver and sort of encounter the course on their own terms, especially with those kinds of video and audio-based projects, whether they're one offs in a first-year class, or sort of the whole thing in a special topics course.

SW: Your forthcoming book, Responsible Pedagogy: Moving Beyond Authority and Mastery in Higher Education, will be published later this year. Can you talk to me about your book and your motivations for writing and what you hope teachers and readers will take away from it?

ED: Yeah. Thanks so much for asking about that. This book project really grew out of one of the things that has just been both in academic, scholarly, but also just an everyday question for me since I started teaching, which is, how do we talk about, make sense of, theorize, and put into practice the relationship between teachers and students, both presently in 21st century classrooms and throughout the history of rhetorical education? And that's just one of those things that I think a lot of new teachers are thinking about, how do my students perceive me? What is this role I've been thrust into? What do I want to...how do I want to present myself to my students? And you see all kinds of conversations about this from, do I see myself, or do I present myself as more of this sort of stereotypical, tweed jacket, college professor? Am I more of a coach to my students?

What role do I want to sort of take here? And so that's where this book really came from, is just trying to make sense of where we have gotten that sense of who teachers are and what rhetorical role they inhabit when it comes to students and other kinds of social and political structures. And how do we navigate that again, both historically and contemporarily. So what this book became as I was working through those questions is a way of thinking through some of the really predominant concepts that have driven how we talk about the relationship between students and teachers and what the sort of rationale for that relationship is over the course of the sort of history of rhetorical education. The things that I'm really looking at in that book are, first, how for so long notions of authority and specifically teacherly authority were used to sort of ground that relationship, that the rhetoric teacher, the rhetorician, the writing teacher had some kind of authority, some kind of mastery over a cultural practice, a type of communication that they would train students in.

And this wasn't always that "banking concept" of education, but it was also often really premised on the notion of the teacher as this master figure. I think for a lot of us now, there's been a switch, which is what I look at in this second half of the book to a real focus on student agency. Making sense of, and justifying what we do in the classroom, not in terms of our authority as teachers, but a little bit more in terms of the agency that we are trying to foster in students. And across the board in the book, the thing that I'm really trying to look at with that term, responsible pedagogy, that kind of title for the book, is what difference it might make to think about education in terms of the sort of mutual responsibility that is shared among teachers and students and students and students in a classroom. Not as sort of individuals who are becoming more attentive or more authoritative, but who are susceptible, vulnerable to each other, living alongside one another, and really thinking about responsibility in the classroom.

Not as something that we build on top of agency, in the sense of like, this class is going to teach you to be a responsible citizen by making good choices and being ethical towards others or whatever. But in terms of just this inescapable exposure, we have to each other, which is sometimes sort of a wonderful thing, and sometimes an immensely difficult and frightening thing, but I think it really characterizes so much of what makes education meaningful.

A lot of that is looking at even the way that you have predatory for-profit universities, companies like Turnitin. Recently, like EdTech companies that have really adopted the language of agency and personalization and all of these terms that people in rhetoric and writing studies have been trying to make the case work for years. Student centered, but really leveraging them as these "disruptive" capitalist forces that I think do some real good work of undermining the education or the infrastructure of public education. And trying to suggest that maybe thinking in terms of responsibility might give us a way to sort of make the case for and think about our work as teachers, the possibilities of the classroom in a way that is a little bit different, I think might open up, both practical and ethical horizons that agency and authority without throwing either of them, particularly agency, out the window or anything like that, don't necessarily do.

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