

Episode 79: Gavin P. Johnson

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Gavin P. Johnson about multimodal pedagogies and practices, queer rhetorics, failure, and grades as a technology of surveillance.

Gavin P. Johnson is a teacher-scholar specializing in multimodal writing, queer rhetorics, and community-engaged learning. He currently works as an assistant professor at Christian Brothers University in Memphis, TN, where he teaches courses in cultural rhetorics, digital media, and writing and coordinates the Certificate in Professional Writing. His research and service receive national recognition, including the 2021 NCTE/CCCC Lavender Rhetorics Dissertation Award for Excellence in Queer Scholarship, the 2020 Computers and Composition Hugh Burns Best Dissertation Award Honorable Mention, the 2016 NCTE/CCCC Gloria Anzaldúa Rhetorician Award, and the 2018 Kairos Service Award as part of the start-up team for nextGEN: an international listserv and advocacy space for graduate students in rhetoric and composition studies.

Gavin, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your teaching and research embrace multimodal pedagogies and practices. Can you talk more about your approach to teaching and the affordances of multimodality in writing classes?

GPJ: Absolutely. Thanks so much for having me. I'm very happy to be a part of this podcast. I mean, at the core of where I really bring in multimodality and digital work is thinking about what resonates with me. I was a first-generation college student. Reading straight essays or books was really never the thing that interests me. Part of the reason I got into English studies is because someone eventually told me, "Hey, you can study pop culture stuff." For me, it's all about the engagement. And for me, what always clicked was the multimodal stuff, bringing in material, different kinds of materials and juxtaposing an old newspaper with a video clip, let's say like a protest, seeing not only a description of the protest but seeing visuals of the protest and maybe having memorabilia or ephemera from it, like a button, being able to take these materials and put them together to understand a more full, robust, communicative act.

So that's where I really try to go with it with students. How do we communicate with each other through everyday objects? How do we communicate with each other through media that exceeds the written word? That's not to discount the written word because as I like to remind students, the written word is a mode of communication, so it can fit into the multiple modes of communication. And so doing that work in the writing classroom allows students to stop thinking about writing on the like basic level of pen to paper or finger to keyboard and really start thinking about writing as a communitive act between you and another person or you and your audience. It's a relationship builder. So multimodality for me is the chance of building that stronger relationship because there are more opportunities for you to engage, catch your audience, catch their attention.

SW: I'm thinking about the pedagogical values of multimodality like engagement and accessibility, using multiple modes to make meaning and construct knowledge, to build communities. Do you mind talking about a specific multimodal assignment you use and how you frame that assignment for students?

GPJ: Putting those kinds of values into the classroom looks like for me, is giving students lots of options of how they want to express the argument or express whatever they're trying to get across. So one of my favorite examples is taking the literacy narrative, which is a classic genre of writing pedagogy and opening it up to be this multimodal project. Thinking about communication and having students either record their literacy narrative or create a digital timeline of literacy events is one of my favorite things. I've had a student who part of her literacy practice was creating art. So she created a ceramic ramekin set and each ramekin had a point in her literacy journey. So those kinds of opportunities for me, opening that up so that students are not only demonstrating or not only talking about their literacies but demonstrating them in various ways.

I predominantly teach digital media courses. So often that literacy narrative is about your digital literacies. And so walk me through how you learn to use your smartphone or walk me through your first experience on the internet or something like that. And so that's what I ask students to do is to take me there, tell me the story and a lot of that is based in traditional composition and literacy studies. Working with Beverly Moss, who I was able to work with at Ohio State and learn about literacy and then expand on what Beverly taught me to also include digital literacies and mobile literacies. That's one of my favorite assignments is a digital literacy narrative. It's simple but also very complex and gives students a chance to really think critically about skills that are often invisible to them.

SW: You also specialize in cultural and queer rhetorics. Do you mind talking more about how that work – in cultural and queer rhetorics – informs your approach to teaching writing?

GPJ: Cultural and queer rhetorics, for me all rhetorical practice is a cultural practice. And I work from that base. I follow the work of cultural rhetoricians, African-American and black rhetoricians like Jackie Jones Royster, indigenous scholars like Malea Powell, as well as bringing in queer scholarship, both within our own field. So Jackie Rhodes, Eric Darnell Pritchard, those really amazing scholars but also queer theory and thinking what's happening beyond rhetoric and composition that can then be retooled to make the classroom a more accepting, a safer, a more experimental and provocative place. So for me, thinking about queer rhetorics and cultural rhetorics often also means talking and continuing to think about multimodality, thinking about how groups that are historically pushed out from and away from the modes of communication, found ways to communicate.

So thinking about 90s queer zines, that cutting and pasting and juxtaposing information together, that was both fun and playful but also could be really informative in terms of health and safety and community building. So thinking along those terms and really thinking about not only how do we as scholars and students learn about different cultures and practices but learn about those

cultures and their practices on their terms, not in a sanitized anthropologic way but in a truly rhetorical way based in listening and learning.

*SW: So you co-wrote a chapter in *Failure Pedagogies* called “The Uses of Queer Failure: Navigating the Pedagogical Mandate of Happiness.” In this chapter, you talk about what it means to embody failure. Can you talk about how you frame failure in this chapter and how this orientation of failure helps teachers better understand what it means to fail or what failure means?*

GPJ: Absolutely. So first off this is a co-written chapter, you mentioned that. I wrote this with one of my colleagues from Ohio State, Ryan Sheehan. Ryan and I through chance became roommates when we both moved to Columbus. And then we had lots of long conversations about readings in seminars and just theories that are interesting to us or things that really bothered us. And this chapter was actually one of the easiest things I've ever written because Ryan and I had basically rehearsed the chapter in our apartment for three years before the CFP for *Failure Pedagogies* came out and we were like, “Ah, we can finally write what we've been talking about.” And so where that chapter comes from is Ryan and I's belief that a lot of scholars, especially in our field, and this is no shade to anyone, but we think a lot of scholars misread Jack Halberstam's idea of queer failure to believe that they really latch on to this idea of fail, fail again, fail better, which doesn't really jive with what we believe Halberstam is actually saying and what a truly queer understanding of failure would be.

And that understanding is that people who are queer, people who understand themselves as queer, be that as a sexual identity or as just a person who feels out of place in the world embody failure. So you definitely picked up on that. They embody failure. It's not simply that they fail, it is that they are failures because they don't meet the standards of a white cis hetero patriarchy capitalistic society. What we're pushing against is this idea that you can fail and then from that failure you necessarily have to turn that into something productive, be happy about your failure because you'll succeed later. And what we're pushing against is this idea that, that is how the idea has to move forward. We call it the *telos* of failure, which is saying you fail once, you learn your lesson, you succeed the next time.

In our reading and in that chapter, what we're really suggesting is that we shouldn't always be looking towards this idea of success as the end goal because often what is defined as success is based in racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist notions of life and learning. So what we're saying is that we should take this idea of navigation. How do we navigate through life and orient and reorient ourselves constantly? And use that to navigate a life that is livable and a life that is joyful through learning and through practices that feel legitimate and feel good to us in our bodies, in our souls.

So, yeah, I mean, at the end of the day, that's really what we're talking about in that chapter is using queer theory, especially queer affect theory, like Sara Ahmed's work to push against the pessimism of failure without falling into the oppressive mandate of happiness, which is a thin line to navigate. I hope Ryan and I did that. We tried really hard to balance that because it is a balancing act. It's a very careful navigation not to be queerly pessimistic or overly happy about what your “failures” or “successes.”

SW: How does this work influence your approach to teaching?

GPJ: So in part of the chapter, I have this section that is from my perspective specifically, and it's looking at grades because I'm really interested in grades and institutional ideas of success and failure as represented through assessment. So that's a conversation I'd constantly have with students about how failure or success is represented and how we can try to work against some of those systems. So in class I talk with students and we have conversations about, well, let's talk about a time where you felt you failed. Why did you feel that you failed?

Or let's talk about a time that you felt successful in writing, why did that feel successful? Was it because you actually made your point and felt like you actually convinced someone or informed someone? Or was it just because you got a good grade? Those are the kinds of conversations I have in the class often as I'm talking with you and really remembering the conversations that I've had this semester with students where the question was, I didn't frame it in terms of failure or reorienting failure but thinking about reorienting success, what does success look like?

I think we've done a lot of work on that side of failure, theorizing and putting into practice what failure looks like. So now I'm interested in what does success look like that is authentic and embodied and based in relational practice where we can all collectively succeed at something as opposed to one person succeeding and one person failing. So, in class, what that looks like is not only having the conversations about assessment and grading but also really diving in and devoting time to collectively writing goals for the class, putting together working groups. In my class we have discourse about how to make those collaborations deeper and more attentive so that we try, we don't always, but we try to avoid the pitfalls of collaboration that always plagued writing classes where one person works on the theme and the other three people don't.

So we try to get more investment from every person and when people are setting their own goals and really doing something that they are interested in, I find they are really willing to put in effort and really aim for a success that is often very different than what we would expect from a first semester, second semester, freshmen writing student or even a senior. For me, it's about working together to define goals instead of having goals defined for us.

SW: This is my last question. You have a chapter in Privacy Matters called "Grades as a Technology of Surveillance." Can you talk about this interplay between grading, technology, and surveillance?

GPJ: I've been thinking about grades for a long time, mostly because I was always one of those students that I was super stressed and anxious about my grades, to the point that it really damaged my perception of myself for a very long time. When I went into my master's and started teaching, I definitely was recreating bad habits, bad teacher habits and really forcing trauma onto students and once I realized that, I completely reassessed what I was doing. So after my first semester of teaching, I was like, "Oh, something doesn't feel right here. What am I doing wrong?" And around that time, I was lucky enough to see Asao Inoue speak, that's right around the time that antiracist assessment ecologies came out. I really dove into that work.

Where these things start intersecting for me, if we think of technology not as like computers and bytes and screens but as tools, which is the base of what technology is, it is a tool. And we think of grades as a tool in the classroom to do something, be it assess or discipline. Then we can see grades and technology or grades as a technology. What I became interested in and worried by, in some of what I was seeing was that the traumatizing effects of grades, the affective impact of grading and assessment was really expanding under current digital technologies. Like so many things, digital technologies, magnify, they've magnified, they don't necessarily fit or change things as much as they just magnify things we were already doing. Part of what I was thinking about and I'm still thinking about, how do we use technology beneficially for teaching? Because I think that technology is absolutely critical to the work that we do in the classroom. So how do we keep doing that work but use technology to magnify the generative parts of classroom work?

So again, for me, it's reorienting and moving away from this idea of the greatest, the most important part. What we can say about the student at the end of the class is the most important part versus what a student can actually take away from the class. I'm still thinking through these ideas constantly but based on the work that I did in *Privacy Matters* and really thinking about grades as surveillance and thinking about, well, how do we dismantle surveillance structures? It's all about bringing in and getting more input and buy in and critical thinking from the communities that are or were surveilled. So where my mind is going now is, how do we bring students into these conversations about assessment, about grading in ways that are reflective of the cultural rhetorical values that I hold and many others in our field hold? And also just thinking about continuing the really important work of assessment that people have done and really making sure that assessment is seen as a generative practice and not a disciplining practice.

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