Episode 40: Holly Hassel
Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Holly Hassel about feminist pedagogy, teaching online, two-year colleges, student success, and the future of rhetoric and composition and the teaching of writing. Holly Hassel is Professor of English at North Dakota State University. She was previously a faculty member at the University of Wisconsin-Marathon County for 16 years, a two-year, open-access campus, and served as editor of *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* from 2016-2020.

I actually reached out to Holly to see if she'd be interested in having a conversation with me on the podcast given her teaching and research in two-year colleges and also her position as the Assistant Chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the largest organization in rhetoric and composition. I wanted to hear more about the work she's done as well as her vision for the field. Thankfully, she agreed to be on the podcast. And I was surprised when she said she reads all the transcripts to the episodes. So I'm thankful for Holly, and what she does and continues to do for writing teachers.

Holly, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I want to start by talking about your approach to teaching writing. You draw on feminist pedagogy which challenges traditional norms and standards attached to teaching and teaching writing. Do you mind talking about your approach to teaching and particularly how feminist pedagogy disrupts the normative construction of the writing classroom?

HH: I guess I would say that…it could be a good idea to sort of define what is feminist pedagogy and what isn't feminist pedagogy and all of that. I came to the idea in the literature and the practices of feminist pedagogy through a series of different avenues, right? You know, one of them was just having studied in graduate school feminist theory, feminist literature. I was familiar already with kind of the principles of, you know, feminist thinking, but not necessarily with the idea of what does that look like in a classroom, right. And then as I started my first position, well, the position I had for most of my career at the University of Wisconsin—Marathon County, an open access two-year campus, I started doing a lot of work with Women's and Gender Studies and with teaching online.

So I'm going to get to the writing classroom. But my route came from Women's and Gender Studies and through online pedagogy. I started teaching online in 2004. And it was kind of like an asynchronous model, but not like a sort of self-paced. It was the idea that students would be accessing that course or the ways they would participate in it, but it was really designed—our program, like many two-years—to meet the needs of non-traditional students: people with jobs, people with kids, and the idea that you know, that they needed to be able to access education

whenever it was possible for them. So, when I started designing that course, I had to think about, and I worked with one of my colleagues, Dr. Nancy Chick, what does it look like to create an active learning, feminist pedagogical context or site in an online environment?

That became, in some ways, a counterintuitive way of entering into like, how do you develop community in a classroom? It means that you can't depend on usual markers or barometers of like, what does it mean for a student to be engaged? What does it mean for a student to be learning? You know, I think traditional pedagogy often is in response to certain kinds of assumptions like, "Oh, we're all in the room together and the teacher is there and they're in the front of the classroom, and they're telling you things or telling you information." And certainly writing pedagogy has not embraced that for a really long time. But you know, thinking more disruptively, I suppose, from what that face to face environment looks like when it's fraught with questions about authority, questions about who's authorized to speak, who knows things? Who creates knowledge? What are people's responsibilities? Coming at it from a totally asynchronous online environment was a really critical learning experience for me, in part because, and now I'm seeing all the ways that it's really interesting and relevant, I had to figure out ways that I could create the things that mattered to me, right, like the values that mattered, like having a sense of community, giving students opportunities to sort of demonstrate their learning opportunities for feedback, opportunities for conversation, giving students that sense that they're contributing, right.

How does that look beyond the model of…we all show up at the same time in the same physical space, you know, some of us talk and some of us listen, right? I guess that's to say that, I feel like that learning that I did at the very start of my career as a faculty member was really important in shaping my subsequent approaches to writing.

SW: I want to continue talking about feminist pedagogy and online pedagogy. Was there a tenet in feminist pedagogy or particular strategy that you wanted to really emphasize through teaching online? Maybe a value that you wanted to be at the center? And then could you connect that value to a teaching practice?

HH: Another kind of eye opening realization for me in the work that I was initially doing on feminist pedagogy and online learning was the idea that if I was saying that the thing that mattered to me was that students needed to be engaged, right, that's the sort of watchword in everybody's teaching philosophy or whatever, right—student engagement—it became really clear to me that engagement looks very different in an online asynchronous classroom. But it also can look really powerful and important, and like more real honestly, than engagement in a face to face classroom. So if I had to say that there was an undergirding principle, it would be like engagement, critical thinking, critical conversation, and this idea of community.

So if I just even ground that in specifics, it meant that at the start of things, recognizing that, like, discussion was not a thing that was added on, right? Discussion was at the center of what we did. Discussion was the most important thing. So then you have to make accompanying choices about

how you sort of…what you evaluate, right? It's how you center that as what the course is that's going to disrupt the ways students experience it. I guess what I mean by that is if I'm thinking about, "How do I communicate to students that what matters is their voices, that they're engaging, that they're participating?" That means I say our discussions are 30% of the course grade, right? 30% of the course grade is the degree to which you participate in these conversations, whether it's review, whether it's responding, whether it's small groups, fishbowl discussions, whatever you do online, that's the center.

I think that is really different than…just even like the idea of videos. I've never posted a video in an online class, ever. Ever, right? Because my presence is like the interactivity, it's the conversation, it's the responding to students, it's the writing part of it, engaging with what you're saying, making it a space, that's really, I think, centering the conversation. And it's structurally demanding that students be engaged, which is like to say, to participate in an online discussion, you have to write something down, or write something down and post it. To be present in a face to face discussion means you're in the room, right? That doesn't mean that you're not absorbing or listening or engaging in a quieter way. But for a lot of students, it's not a good fit for them, or it's uncomfortable, or it's difficult for them to make their voice heard in a conversation no matter how you try to democratize that pedagogy, like in a face to face classroom.

I might try to do round robin, or fishbowls, or other kind of techniques for small group and large groups to sort of help students feel like their voices are part of the discussion. But there was still…there's still always those students who are going to feel more entitled to speak. And so one of the things that I found…really the potentiality of the online asynchronous classroom was that everyone can speak, right? Everyone can make their voice heard by posting and contributing in a way that, you know, is different in that kind of time bound place bound conversation. So that's part of it. I'll say, I think the choices that we make about how we weight the work that students do, the intellectual work, that really matters, and it communicates things to them about what really matters. I think it's really important to align those things.

SW: So I've got to go back to something you said earlier. You've been teaching online since 2004 and you haven't uploaded a video? Like I'm so surprised by that. But I think what's really important here is another thing you said which is really knowing what we value as teachers and knowing how that is being practiced and how that's being assessed. For you, that's engagement and discussion. Those are at the center of your classroom. Providing space and opportunities for students to interact.

HH: Yeah, and I will say that as I started to do more online writing courses, that making discussions and peer review and conversations about reading, and then also like responsibility, if there was another principle besides engagement that I would say is operational in the feminist pedagogical classroom, its responsibility, right? And I don't mean that in the like, "Do your stuff on time and turn it in." I mean that in the sense that we're all participants in this community, and we're all responsible for each other's learning, and we're responsible to each other. The kind of like independent contractor of the student, you know that model is…I work really hard to try to

disrupt that, that it's not just showing up. So that's why even like the idea of post a video, watch a lecture, take a quiz, to me, that reinforces that transactional, like independent model of teaching and learning in an online class like, "Oh, I'm getting this information. And now, I'm just telling it back to you," which I mean, for some fields works fine as a sort of foundation, right. But I think for a writing class, what you really try to cultivate is students' ability to communicate in a wide range of settings, to participate in conversation with others, to be able to take risks with their work and with their writing, that you have to structure your learning environment so that students have real opportunities to do that. Right?

And so, the one thing I started doing much more in the last, I guess, eight years or so, is…I always did conferencing, right, you know one on one conferencing with students, but making it clear that students have choices about how they want to do that conferencing: Skype, phone, chat, you know, all of these different ways. To me, that's important to those principles of community and engagement and responsibility. I'm responsible to students, for giving them real time feedback on their work and to understand them as individual learners. So I might not be posting a video, but I'm definitely having a conversation. And you can, you know, you can do that in an online class. I think that's something that maybe is not quite as visible right now for people who have been sort of thrust into the emergency remote instruction or a different kind of virtual learning. You still have a relationship with students. You still have to build that relationship. That's what I think really engages students and keeps them involved in their own learning and involved in the course.

SW: I'm going to turn the page a bit. You taught at the University of Wisconsin–Marathon County, a two-year college in central Wisconsin, for 16 years. Now you're at North Dakota State University, a public four-year university in Fargo. I'm interested in that switch between these two institutions, particularly given the context of a two-year college and a four-year university.

HH: Yeah, I was a faculty member for 16 years. And then before that when I was in my PhD program, I taught as an adjunct at the community college, in Lincoln, Nebraska, where I was. So when I was applying for full time jobs, I already knew I really like this student population. I really like working…I mean two-year college students are so diverse, right? Just so diverse in like every sense of the word. So the student population that I came to know, through my work over those three years part-time, led me to think…like this is the kind of job that I would really like. And so when I started at UW—Marathon County, we had 13 campuses across the state, we were considered a single institution, the University Wisconsin Colleges. So what that meant was that the English department was all of the English faculty at all those campuses.

So we had a shared curriculum, we had shared placement mechanisms, right, you know, we were open access, and that was part of our mission, we were really proud of that work. Over the course of the last few years, of course, the politics in Wisconsin have changed, and that has affected the UW system. I don't know, so that has been really fascinating and, well, that part wasn't—that part was actually really terrible. It was going to change our mission in a really fundamental way being sort of assigned as a campus that would belong to and really be an

extension of a four-year residential campus, which is not what our mission was before. And so I kind of made that choice…well, that was the only choice because I was like, "Okay, I know that there's work that I want to do in the field, I know that there's work I want to do to sort of help people at the four-year university levels and graduate students kind of understand what it means to be a faculty member at a two-year college, because to me, there's a real kind of yawning chasm between the work that takes place at two-year colleges and the kind of work that your average English faculty member, you know, has to do, has to take on, has the opportunities to do, and how people are trained. There's just a really big gap.

And so making that shift was strange, I guess, and I continue to realize things about the cultures of each of these two different kinds of institutions that I didn't know, or that I might have suspected or wasn't aware of, or didn't even realize. Like we're having conversations about students and about pedagogy and about curriculum and about assessment, we don't even mean the same thing. Like it's really fascinating, But also sometimes frustrating. I guess I'd say the difference is…there's so many differences. Pedagogically in some ways it's rooted in, who's your student population? Right? What's your program look like? Who's your teaching staff, you know, these kind of material realities. They're just so vastly different, student populations in an open access two-year college and at a residential four-year institution with a graduate program and a research emphasis, like, their world apart.

But I don't think that difference is quite visible. More specifically, it has become really more clear to me how much writing programs, especially four-year, more research intensive places are structured often around the needs of graduate student instructors, right? That kind of WPA model. Then, in a two-year college, you have instructors who are, in all likelihood, really experienced, that's what their core work is, they teach first-year writing day in and day out every semester. Like my work was 16 years of teaching first and second year students, sometimes developmental writing, sometimes studios, sometimes literature, but like, that is what I did all the time. So the culture of those two places, they're really, really distinct.

I'd love it if we could see more bridges between helping people understand when you're getting a master's degree or a doctorate, and you are going to take a job at a school that's not like the one that you got your degree at, there's a lot to learn. And there's some really big differences in terms the work that you're going to be asked to do, and how you can prepare yourself to do it.

SW: You mentioned how different these institutional contexts are and I'm curious as to how these sites can come together to help close the gap. How communication can exist between two-year colleges and four-year universities, for example, in order for these relationships to thrive, and for us to work toward a better future as writing teachers in rhetoric and composition?

HH: I think there's all sorts of ways, right? I mean, so *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* is the journal NCTE publishes and TYCA, Two-Year College Association. There's a lot of books written about these issues. Darin Jensen, Christie Toth, I know Darin has been on the podcast. There's Howard Tinberg. You know, Joanne Giordano and I have written some stuff. We did a

special issue a few years ago on graduate preparations. I think the first thing to do is that graduate institutions need to recognize or graduate programs, I guess, need to recognize and familiarize themselves with the work that already exists on two-year colleges or community colleges because there's a lot of it. I mean, that's an old suggestion. There's tons already out there on that, but even just understanding something like developmental education reform, or acceleration and placement mechanisms, you know, understanding that first year writing and transitions between post-secondary school and college, which look so many different ways for the students who come to two-year colleges, that is an important thing that is of interest and it's central to understanding if you're going to teach at a two-year college.

English instruction doesn't just start at 102, right? For a lot of students, if they've been out of school for 20 years, there's something happening in between there that they need support, they need a transition, and so two-year college books have been doing tons of work on this, right. They've been doing accelerated learning programs, like the Peter Adams stuff out of the city of Baltimore Community College, integrated reading and writing instruction that's trying to transform the ways that students develop their skills in both areas at the same time and also reduce the number of credits that they paid, Writing Studio, a couple of really great collections out about that, Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson were the first to write about that.

There's been a couple of different white papers written by TYCA: the White Paper on Developmental Education Reforms, the White Paper on Placement, you know, just like becoming familiar with the kinds of issues. Because the student populations, and there's overlap, of course, in four-year and two-year students, but the issues and the challenges and the barriers, and also the joys and delights of two-year college teaching, you know, there's stuff that exists out there, and you need to know about it, right. And it matters, and it's important.

I would love to see more of…this is less of a like, "Here's a set of things to read" and more of just like a mental shift, right, a paradigm shift that we see the work that we do in writing studies, which is about social justice, as absolutely essential and underpinning the work of two-year colleges. So Nell Ann Pickett, when she was chair of CCCC, her Chair's address was called "Two-Year Colleges: Democracy in Action." I see like this really interesting tension sometimes between people who are at universities, especially those that are selective and that kind of take pride in being selective and attracting a certain kind of academic student, academically prepared student. And then a sort of tension between that and then professed kind of values about social justice, because the truth is there's all sorts of ways that two-year colleges are…they're democracy in action, right?

Like, there is social justice work happening in two-year colleges. Because you are giving a pathway to any student who wants it. Any student, right, to higher education. That, to me, is like so exciting. That's what was energizing to me, and rewarding about being at the two-year college because I could feel like I was part of that work helping students kind of find their way in college. And part of that was because, for me, I was a first-generation college student, no one in my family had gone to college, I didn't know what to expect, I didn't know how it worked.

College was transformative to me in huge ways. I just think more people should have it. Everyone should have it. That's what I think. And I don't see that relationship, necessarily, between the values that are stated always being made as clearly as it could be. Open access colleges are important, doing important work, and doing really important social justice work.

SW: Have you been able to see or identify common challenges in teaching practices that impede student success in both contexts? Even though every institution is different, and challenges are really local, I'm thinking about how commonalities can help build relationships between sites and teachers.

HH: So the things that I see as commonalities are, I feel like any policies or practices or processes or structures that put barriers for students, or that assume a certain kind of engagement with the classroom, or assume a certain type of material reality, rather than emphasizing their kind of growth as writers, their literacy development, their achievement of course learning outcomes, I think those are, you know, those are going to be impediments no matter what kind of an institution you're at. So, for example, I think about attendance policies, or late policies, or sort of like punitive kinds of classroom practices that sort of seem to be maybe instructors or programs think that they're proxies for learning. It's kind of like I was saying at the beginning about my online instruction, being there or submitting something on time or not submitting it on time is not a proxy for learning. I mean, it's not. But what it is a proxy for is sort of like material conditions, sort of the context that they're in. So to the extent that a policy or practice or process creates barriers that aren't connected to students' achievement and learning goals, I think that's going to affect any student, regardless of context. I think it's going to have a more significant negative effect on students, you know, that you just effectively excluded that student from higher education in some way, versus saying, the goal here is to show me "this," help me figure out how you can show me that you do that. Or that, you know that.

SW: Given your position as the Assistant Chair and Program Chair this year for the Conference on College Composition and Communication, I have to ask about your vision for rhetoric and composition.

HH: So right, I am in my first year in the officers rotation for CCCC. I would say my approach to thinking about governance, to thinking about the convention, to thinking about scholarship, and all the things that CCCC can do in the field more broadly, is really driven by so many of the same principles that I talked about in my writing classroom or in my program. It's inclusion. How do we make it more possible for more people to be part of what we do? How can we create a community that people have access to, whether that's because of their employment status, or their funding opportunities? That's a principle that to me…how do we create as many opportunities as possible for more people? I think another thing related to that is transparency. How do you make the expectations visible for everyone, right? So it's not like a secret club or something that you only get access to because you know this or that, or how it works.

So I say that because I am getting around to your question, I suppose, which is that's how I think about all of writing studies research, writing studies scholarship, writing studies organizational practices. How can I help more people to understand how things work, right? And how can I hear what more people have to say about whether it's working for them or not working for them? And then, how can we make the criteria for participation clear and transparent? How can we make the decision-making processes clear and transparent? Because I think about what's the direction of writing studies or composition studies, it's, you know, I don't know what that direction needs to be. But if I listen to what people have to say, then I can know more about what people in the field think it needs to be, you know what I'm saying?

I think about some of the things that CCCC has done in the last few years, when I was part of the executive committee, and that was really important to me was creating the User's Guide. I think a lot of people don't know about that. But I was on a committee called "Committee for Committees," or "Committee on Committees," and we created a user's guide so that people can understand here's how things work. It was part of the group that worked on developing Emergent Researcher grants that like split out emergent versus non-emergent, whatever that looks like. It just is the idea that we need to foster and support and mentor. And that includes the development of the regional conferences, which is to say, like, "Hey, not everyone can, because of childcare or health or money or whatever, can afford to go once a year for five days someplace. What are the ways that we can make these resources more available?" So again, I really think it comes back to…my work on online teaching, recognizing that there's so many things possible, and so many things more possible than you…I don't know, decision makers and policies would have us believe, right. There are ways to access things.

And we're better when things are accessible, as accessible as possible to as many people. I'll say one more thing, which is, I think one of the futures of writing studies and composition studies is that more people need to learn more things, which is, more people need to be generalists. The idea that hyper-specialized research that's going to be 40% or 60% of your job, that's just not matched by what we need, right? Like what students need, what departments need. So the more that I think we as colleagues and as graduate programs and as teachers of seminars can do to help new folks understand the kinds of skills and kinds of knowledge that are really necessary and that are important or valuable, I think, the better off we're going to be.

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