

Episode 33: Howard Tinberg

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Howard Tinberg about how he got into teaching, the importance of reading and teaching reading in the writing classroom, Teaching for Transfer, challenges facing two-year colleges, and future directions for two-year college research.

I met Howard a few years ago and we've had a lot of really good conversations since then. Howard is a great teacher and a wonderful person. I feel lucky anytime I get the chance to talk with him because he's so genuine and kind. He listens carefully and he speaks with intentionality. I actually talked with Howard right after Pedagogue launched. I think it was early June 2019. And I told him kind of what I was doing and my plan for the podcast. He encouraged me and told me that it was going to be a great resource for the field. At that point in time, I think I had just released the first episode, maybe the second, both with Mike Rose. So that conversation, that moment with Howard, really meant a lot to me.

Howard Tinberg is professor of English at Bristol Community College, Mass. and is the author of *Border Talk: Writing and Knowing in the Two-Year College* and *Writing with Consequence: What Writing Does in the Disciplines*. He is co-author of *The Community College Writer: Exceeding Expectations*, and *Teaching, Learning and the Holocaust: An Integrative Approach*. He is co-editor of *Deep Reading: Teaching Reading in the Writing Classroom*, *What is "College-Level" Writing?*, and *What is "College-Level" Writing? Vol 2*. He is a former editor of *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* and former Chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

Howard, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: So I want to start with your story. How did you get into teaching?

HT: I thought a lot of it over the years. I could reference certain milestones as I was growing up, like when one of my brothers subscribed me to Columbia Book of the Month Club, Yale Shakespeare delivered in those really ... and making it a mission to read all the plays of Shakespeare and the poetic works. We didn't have a lot of books before that time in my home. We're the children of immigrants, and working hard, working class, just trying to make things work out.

But there was always a value attached to schooling. I think we imbibed that. I guess I imbibed the view that reading and being literate was a pretty special status, even though my parents themselves did not have much in the form of education: refugees from the war, second world war, and they came with just the clothes on their backs, essentially. There was that value of

teaching, which is very much wrapped up in our faith and Jewish faith and the study of the Torah, the Talmud, the sacred texts, so all that's there.

As far as getting into teaching is concern, I think that may have been a product, a consequence of that reverence for reading, the sense that to read well or to be literate endows one with a strength or a magical power, if you want to call it that. So teaching seemed to be a natural follow-through toward getting a degree. Everyone, all my siblings, have post-graduate degrees. There's one lawyer, there's three PhDs. We just ran with it and stayed in college in school as long as we can.

I guess you could make the case I've never left school. I'm still there. I'm still in college. So it's been an interesting ride, but I've since realized that teaching is not a byproduct. It's not a default. You have to really be devoted to it. It's a passionate calling. As an undergraduate, I really, really loved the classes. I really loved the discussions. I was amazed by the lecturing skills of many of my professors. This was at UCLA. It was a very conservative department in many ways back in the day. Mike Rose, still hanging out there, I understand. Kind of virtuoso performance that I'd see from these very, very thoughtful interpreters of the text. Really special, and I was influenced by that. There's no doubt about it.

But I also have to say that when I got into graduate school, there wasn't a lot of attention paid to pedagogy and teaching. It's a shame. We began to develop a course to prepare us to teach the 101, the first year comp. But it was very basic and very much about grammar mechanics, not really, comp/rhet was just finding its footing. So we had to bring our own passion to it.

Those early days of teaching as a TA, I was too anxious trying to figure out what's going on here to really get confident. It took a long, long time to become confident in my teaching. A really long time. I think eventually what happened is that I'd become comfortable in ... even if the students can't quite understand exactly what I'm trying to get at, they feel some of the enthusiasm. It's a cliché, but I think that matters to students, that care and concern and passion that they see in the person standing in front of them.

SW: So from UCLA to Bristol Community College. What eventually led you to Bristol?

HT: Well, as many ... like many of our students at the community college, it was a windy and twisting road. In fact, when I was at UCLA, I assumed that I would be teaching at an R1 institution. That's the way we were trained. No one ever talked about what was then called the "junior college," except for one fellow grad student, who did get a Master's and then went off to junior college, or community college. That was not on my radar. I knew very little about community colleges.

I have to admit it, to be perfectly honest, I had an attitude toward them, something. I grew up in LA and I heard about City College, LA City College. It was just a place for athletes to go, where people were trying to figure themselves out academically. I didn't really know much about the mission. So I was primed to teach at an R1 institution. As someone interested in romantic

literature, man, I had imagined going to the Lake District in the summer and reading Wordsworth there. In fact, I even remember Paul Shields, that used to say that he did that every now and then. He would travel back to Wordsworth country. That was an elitist dream I had at the moment. I began to think at some point, that maybe I needed to be around students who had a greater need for the kind of knowledge that college provides. Oh, I should say also at Brandeis, I became exposed to comp ... this is in the 80s ... the emerging field of comp/rhet. I had no idea that there were intellectual fervor going on there.

At UCLA, it was a default if you ... the prime teaching positions for TAs or GTAs would be literature courses. The rest of us would be teachers for first-year comp. You'd be given the Norton Anthology of Literature, Expository Prose, and go in there and teach. But in the 80s, man, something incredible was going on. That's where I first became exposed to Ann Berthoff's work. She was teaching at UMass Boston as an adjunct, I believe. She was bringing some philosophical content, subject matter. She was bringing in Coleridge and discussing the imagination. I thought, "Wow, she's bringing together my love of romanticism with composition and rhetoric." What was that all about?

So I just became enamored with what was happening in the field and I joyfully and gladly engaged 101, first-year composition. Essentially from that point on, I've been teaching mostly first-year comp with some basic writing, occasionally lit surveys, but really, that's my deal. I can say a lot about the course. First, I think it's the most important course in the curriculum. It carries a huge burden. But it's a significant one and something we all take ... those of us who teach it in a serious way, have a mission to make that work for our students because of the stakes involved.

Eventually I found my way to teaching, well, first of all, part-time at BU and some of the colleges around Boston. But eventually, full-time at BU, the College of Basic Studies, which was a two-year college within BU. And I was intrigued by the idea of having a space, giving students a space who were not quite ready for those upper level courses, upper division courses, to find themselves. But the students themselves weren't as diverse as I'd like for them to have been. So I heard about this opening down 95 in Fall River, Mass at Bristol Community College.

I thought I'd give it a try to see if I could be in a classroom with older students, much more diverse students. As a child of immigrants, I thought, "Well, maybe I'll find images of myself." So I did it, and there I've been all this time. The transition from even the two-year college within BU to the public comprehensive community college was not an easy one. I think for me and perhaps those colleagues around me.

*SW: You've been at Bristol for 30+ years teaching first-year writing. I want to talk about your co-edited book *Deep Reading: Teaching Reading in the Writing Classroom*, which won the 2019 CCCC Outstanding Book Award. You wrote a chapter about how students experience reading in a community college first-year composition class. Can you talk about the importance of teaching reading and how teachers can frame reading in their first-year writing classes?*

HT: Sure. I don't want to generalize, but for many community college students, reading is not seen as much as an opportunity as a barrier to their success, their academic success. Of course, many are often ... read from the screen and read in a multitasking way. So there's little opportunity, I think, for them to dive deep, or invitation to dive deep into the reading. I think, in some ways, we faculty at community colleges are, I was going to say another word... we'll say "facilitate" that assumption or promote that assumption that it's okay for students to come linger on the surfaces. Cynics among us even say, "I will assign my reading, but I'm not assuming the students will do the reading. So here's my PowerPoint demonstration." Students, of course, so often come away from that experience saying, "Well, why did I buy this textbook? What exactly was this textbook doing in this class? I don't have to read. My teacher's going to give me all the bullet points. Why would I bother to read?"

They have very good points ... that the students are raising about this. I think in some ways, we faculty haven't fully integrated the reading within our own course. It's something we do because when we were students, texts were assigned and the assumption is we went out and read them, not with any help, necessarily. We were on our own. But my students require some assistance, it requires some invitations and requires some skills and strategies to be able to read well, what is in front of them.

I think I mentioned in the article that historically, reading has been seen as developmental skill. So those folks in the developmental part of the college would be entrusted with the mission of teaching and reading, and that those of us in the English Department, well, what were we doing exactly? We were creating a taste for literature, if that's the way to put it. Or in a writing class, we were inviting self-reflection to the written word, having students get a sense of who they are as individuals.

But it dawned on me for a variety of reasons that reading is a crucial, should be a crucial part of every single course at the college. But that I think many of us faculty are assuming that it be done somewhere else, but not in the classroom. So I think it was Robert Scholes who said reading's invisible. We have to make it visible to our students. We have to spend time talking about how we read and actually have them read in class. That's something to learn. That's a data point. That's something we have to understand. How well do our students read the work that we're assigning?

Of course, as faculty, we have to ask those questions as we assemble our syllabus: why these readings? Why these and not the others? What's our rationale here, what's our pedagogical explanation? I don't think we do that often enough. I'll say this about the OER movement, the Open Education Resource movement, too, that it's forced many of us to justify the readings that we require, that come at \$100, \$150, 200 bucks, maybe more. Do we really, from a moral perspective, want to ask students to dish out that money when we don't really understand the role of that textbook in our class, or we're not really spending time walking students through and showing them how to become deep readers of this work?

It's a good, good check on our choices because of the situation that our students are facing.

SW: So scaffolding and thinking about and through curriculum is so vital to teaching and teaching effectively. One curriculum model that you use and draw on is Teaching for Transfer (TFT). What are the benefits and advantages in Teaching for Transfer?

HT: I had this discussion yesterday in class about transfer. It's one of the key terms that I use in my Teaching for Transfer first year comp class. It's not a rhetorical term. It's more conceptual and functional in many ways. I think students realize that for them, transfer is a really apt term to use to describe their own lives, especially community college students, that they're constantly moving to someplace, that the community college is stopping place but it's not the end point, but to continue to move along and as they move along, they're being tasked along the way, whether in the workplace or another course, in certain ways.

In the context of writing, they're being, very likely being asked to compose or write in response to whatever an employer asks them to do or another teacher. Of course, transfer itself is key to community college students because they're acquiring credits; they need to be able to be portable moving to a four-year institution, especially. So they're keenly aware of transfer as a personal concept, but what else?

I think the more difficult challenge for them in my class is to think about writing in this way. So what knowledge about writing is portable to them? Now it's a tough task to imagine the challenges that they haven't faced yet. So they can't really ... have to hypothesize, "Okay, where am I going to be asked to write at all? Where am I going to be asked to compose?" What you've been given is not necessarily purely a set of facts that are static, that you give. You've been given a way of asking questions, a way of seeking answers, and learning how to learn, essentially.

This is one of the transferables college will require, somewhat more general, but that you'll acquire and it'll help you down the road, as your job continues to change. Most young people are used to changing jobs very often. They're not going to be in a position like me. I've been in a job for 30+ years, so they need to adapt. So the Teaching for Transfer course in a writing context, actually gives them a set of concepts like rhetorical situation, like genre is part of that, but also context and purpose. Asks them to apply those terms throughout the semester, including I should also say, that the term reflection is a key part of that, that throughout the semester, they are looking back at the work that they've done and seeing how successful they have been, given the correct material.

If they need to change, adapt, they do so. So I just love the idea of an organic, really organized writing course with sequenced assignments. Each one of which seems to offer an opportunity to go back to revise the previous readings. And each one of these weekly assignments is preparing for larger, more ambitious assignments. I've never ... let me just say this, in all the years I've been teaching composition, I've never really felt that there was a coherence that I could rely on.

In part, it was a blessing because first-year comp allows you to do marvelous things with them, and to experiment, which is cool. But I've missed having a coherence and a cogency in the sequencing. Now, composition and rhetoric, as we started referring to it, those really heavy days of the 80s and early 90s when comp was really coming into its own, introduced me to the concept of sequence assignments. David Bartholomae, *Ways of Reading*. I was just, "Wow, is that how it works? You can actually have one assignment lead into the other?" That was a mind-blowing experience for me, but I couldn't ...

It was hard for me, at the community college level, to imagine how that would work. Those are very challenging texts that *Ways of Reading* presents, but now with transfer, you've got us some kind of sequencing, some kind of order that its really remarkable. Not all students get it, but many, if not most, do by the end of the time we're finished here. It has given an order and meaningfulness and purpose to the whole teaching the first year of comp that is very welcome, although it has also brought challenges and I've written about this. When taking the TFT, the Teaching for Transfer to the community college, one has to make adjustments.

This curriculum was designed for large public universities, R1 institutions. Community colleges, we have to be more mindful of our students and what kind of pacing we use. But it's worth a try to try to give them those skills that they can then take with them and apply them whenever they're being asked to propose some form of communication.

SW: Howard, you've been at the same community college for decades, and you've collaborated with so many other teacher-scholars at two-year colleges. What are some of the biggest challenges facing two-year colleges? What would you say, maybe even more specifically, are some challenges writing teachers face in two-year colleges?

HT: Well, I can state the obvious which is the lack of funding, proper funding, for that element of higher ed. Over the years that I've been at Bristol and Mass, Bristol is part of the Massachusetts Community College system, the state has withdrawn support in staggering amounts over the years. We used to be almost like a 60% public institution funded by the public. Now, gosh, it must be closer to 30%. Over the years, I've thought about this question of what holds us back. When I say, "hold us," I mean our students, as well as those of us who work at the community colleges.

I've come to believe that it's in some ways psychological. We do not, meaning those of us who've committed ourselves to two-year college or community college, I think sometimes we do not see the possibilities. I've written about this a lot, that while our students sometimes have difficulty seeing the horizon and seeing how they may succeed down the road, I think we faculty also tend to limit our vision as to what we can do in the classroom, how we personally can succeed as professionals.

So we don't learn as much. We don't review our curriculum as often. We're not as open to change. Yeah, I know I'm generalizing here, but I've considered it an important part of my work

to reach out to faculty, both in my college and elsewhere to two-year colleges to mentor them, to maybe even be a kind of example of someone, of a teacher scholar who can ... so we could teach five sections, but also write for publication.

It's still a kind of rare thing. It's a rare bird, because we do teach so much at the community college. But as I said, I've also said many times, we have no choice but to reflect on our teaching if we want to improve it. If we want to continue to learn our craft and to be able to make our courses interesting to our students and stimulating, we need to innovate as best we can. But it's a scary thing to do that.

It means essentially subjecting your teaching on an ongoing basis to research, to reflection. I'm really into classroom research, still am. Trying to figure out how my students are responding to the tasks that I give them. I've always used student voices within my writing because I feel that they have something to teach me about the work. When we shut down, we don't draw upon students' work in our publications, I think that that's a real void.

SW: Earlier, you used the word "possibilities" to talk about two-year colleges and the work that happens within those contexts. What are the possibilities or what future direction for research and teaching, and/or maybe the role of two-year colleges in the future of higher education, might you consider others think about and study moving forward?

HT: I've been amazed at the crop of teacher-scholars and activists, Patrick Sullivan is one of them. When I first started writing about the two-year college experience, most people were not writing for publication. They may have been scholars, but they weren't necessarily exchanging their ideas with others. Right now, it's huge. Such significant numbers and you've named them early before our conversation here, people who can do all that, who can teach and share what they've learned in teaching and write eloquently passionately about their work. So I hope that that continues.

There are pressures. Most definitely pressures on all of us who teach community college, to be productive and to be accountable for the teaching that we do. There are a lot of demands on our work, but I hope ... I dearly hope that each community college system will support and nurture teacher-scholars to see the teaching at the community college, teaching anywhere, requires constant reflection, and that we allow some space for colleagues to do that. Sabbaticals, obviously being one of them. But even space within a semester, a typical semester.

Obviously, it's crass to say them, but compensate folks in order to do so. I worry about younger faculty not necessarily making a great deal of money because of the economics of teaching at a community college. So they have to load on the courses and load on the online courses, especially. They may burn out sooner than later. Burnout was often cited for me, as one of the seemingly inevitable byproducts of teaching in community college. At some point you stop, you begin to lack energy. You're not curious anymore.

As far as I can see that's public enemy number one for faculty who teach at community colleges, I think we have to hopefully create the conditions for people to continue to want to learn, to be curious, to tackle difficult questions, teaching questions. By the way, the scholarship doesn't necessarily have to be classroom research. It could be more traditional conventional scholarship, maybe even a lab-based research. I still think that's a possibility.

I do worry about two-year colleges morphing into cheaper four-year baccalaureate program. Obviously, many colleges have done that. So there's a unique community mission at open access public two-year colleges, community colleges, that needs to be maintained. But there will be lots of pressures. There are already lots of pressures to, in some way, become that affordable four-year school and make it less accountable to the community. That would be shame if that were to happen.

Within our own professional organizations, I think those of us who teach at open access institutions keep our voices loud and insistent. I know that colleagues mean well, and definitely in composition rhetoric, are thoroughly committed to teaching. But we're not immune and they're not immune to the privileges of academe, shall we put it. So sometimes the voices of folks who teach at intensive, teaching institutions are not always heard at our professional meetings. I think we have to speak up for ourselves. We have to be good scholars. We have to demand that we be let into our flagship journals to share what we know about teaching, at same time, keeping our feet firmly on the ground.

I've had a lot of mentors, but one particular mentor that strikes right now is Lynn Troyka, who was the former chair of Cs, I believe a second two-year college person to be chair of Cs. I remember she was also the first chair of TYCA, Two-Year College Association. I always remember her leading meetings by essentially saying, "I just came from a meeting and they didn't say a darn thing about us."

She is the person who would always remind our four-year colleagues that, "Hey, we're doing a lot of teaching, especially in first-year comp. You got to listen to us." She was always courageous enough to speak up. Not everyone is that way, but I think those of us who have tenure and certain promise in the field need and have an obligation to remind four-year colleagues about the valuable work that we're doing at these two-year college institutions and access-oriented institutions. So I hope that that continues.

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