

Episode 135: Jack Downs

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Jack Downs talks about being an academic support specialist, health sciences, genre and audience awareness, responding to writing, and interdisciplinarity. Jack Downs is the Assistant Director for Academic Support at Washington State University Health Sciences in Spokane. Prior to WSU, Jack was an assistant professor of English and Writing Center director at Whitworth University and Northwest University. His current research interests focused on health, medical humanities, and health sciences writing pedagogy. In another life, Jack published on 19th century British Literary Culture with a special interest in rhetoric in the history of the novel in English. His first book, *Novels, Rhetoric, and Criticism* was released by Vernon Press in September 2022. You can find him on Twitter @jmdstoryteller.

Jack, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Let's start by talking about your position as the assistant director for academic support and your experiences working with students in the health sciences at Washington State University Spokane.

JD: Sure, yeah. It's a unique kind of position. It's not the kind of position you can go seek out because I don't think it exists anywhere else. It kind of grew ad hoc out of needs on this campus that they realized they needed some writing support for health sciences students. WSU is a state university large system. They have multiple campuses. This is the health sciences campus, and they just over time realized they needed some kind of support for that, but nobody really knew what that would look like because we don't gen eds or none of that stuff. Everybody comes here as a junior or to start their program in whatever health sciences field they're studying or we have grad students, so we don't have humanities faculty on campus. We don't have gen ed faculty; we don't have general sciences. It's all health sciences. Nobody knew what this would look like, so I've kind of crafted it myself over time. I started off as just writing support and then it expanded to include providing other kinds of academic support. What I do now is I oversee our peer tutoring program; I supervise our second language support and our learning support, so that would be general student successful, student strategies, stuff like that. But really my day-to-day, I do an awful lot of just sitting down one-on-one with students to talk about their writing. I characterize it sort of as a one person writing center. I don't really have a staff, I don't have peer tutors, I don't have professional tutors. It is me doing all that stuff and I do workshops and that sort of thing, but that's my job there.

I work with students in the context of just meeting whatever need it is that they seem to have. Sometimes they have a good sense for what they need and sometimes they just show up and just say, "I need help." We kind of do some diagnosing and figuring that out, but that's everything from junior level first semester nursing or speech and hearing students or whatever, doing small writing assignments, reflective writing assignments that they have to do for their clinical rotations all the way up to—I have some doctoral students in nursing and other programs that I

have regular sessions with. I coach them through their dissertation so they're getting some writing support on that end. It's everything, that whole scope from very informal general undergrad writing to really specific graduate writing. It's an interesting job and not one that I ever set out to find.

SW: Jack, you're situated in the health sciences. What are some of the conversations that are happening around writing?

JD: Yeah, so I mean all of this was for me as far as getting ready for the job. It was very learn as I go. I did my PhD at Texas Christian University's excellent comp program. My research there was kind of a hybrid literature rhetoric program. I got good training in rhetoric and composition, but I never envisioned myself doing this and I never set myself up to specifically do how science is writing, so I've picked all that up along the way. When I talk about it with students, it really depends on the context I'm in, but I really focus on bringing in a rhetoric composition perspective. We talk a lot about genre awareness, and we talk a lot about audience awareness because there's a sense from both faculty and students that academic writing is simply academic writing. It is a thing somehow, nobody can define it, but we know what it is somehow. Really, the fact is that when I go in to talk to nutrition, exercise, physiology students about writing up a case report on a client that they're working with in their clinical, that's so different than talking to our PhD in nursing students about the kind of research they're doing there. Really, I just have to hammer the genre awareness and I do that with faculty as well, just to help them remember I'm doing it right now. I've got a faculty member that I'm trying to help her reconfigure some of her writing prompts and she has an assignment, she just calls it a formal paper. We're just hammering out, when you say that, what do you mean? What are your expectations there? What do you think that means? Because what I try to tell faculty especially is you get the writing you ask for. If you ask for a formal paper, you're going to get whatever the students think of as a formal paper.

It's that David Bartholomae, "Inventing the University." I bring that up a lot and when I'm talking to faculty is that when we ask students to write, we're asking them to imagine an audience, a context of all these kinds of things. If we can clarify for them what that context is, they won't do as much guesswork on the front end and you'll get better writing on the back end. That's really the way that I bring a lot of the rhetoric and composition background in. It's always striking to me the way that when I go into a classroom and talk about some of these things—I feel like they're sort of first day of your comp theory class and grad school; it's relatively basic within the field—I bring it up in places where nobody's ever thought about it before because why would they? They're nurses and they're speech pathologists and they do that kind of work and I exit and sometimes they'll pull me aside and go, "That was amazing. We've never thought about it that way before." I just think, within the field, it's really common sense. I'm not doing anything remarkable. I'm just bringing some of that composition comprehension awareness into the conversation. That changes everything, because once you give students and faculty those tools that they've never considered before, they're smart, they're intuitive about some of it, as long as you can get them thinking about it in the right way. At this point, I've been here for seven or eight years; I know what they're doing. I've gotten to know the stuff.

But when I first started, I wasn't equipped for it. I probably made some missteps in providing advice and suggestions about things that made sense to me about transitioning between ideas or the way that we would organize a document or some of those things that just were way outside of the genre or disciplinary expectations for what they're doing. When I realized I was doing that, I just started to ask questions when they came in. Tell me about the assignment. Some of this is sort of basic writing center stuff. Before I came here, I ran writing centers at a couple different schools, and I started to do the things that I told my writing center staff to do that I actually hadn't been doing myself, which is before I jump into somebody's writing, I want to know: what do you think you're doing here? Can you show me the assignment? What is the assignment asking for? Show me the prompt, show me the rubric, and then let me ask you, when you say this thing, or when you say that you have to write through your discussion section, right? There's always a discussion section in your science writing. What is the discussion section doing? If they can't explain that to me, then we need to figure that out ourselves. Then we go and we do some of that background work. I think the way that it would apply outward to providing support outside of our disciplinary comfort zone in English or composition or the humanities more broadly is to just always take the time to ask questions and understand what the student thinks they're doing and then identify the places where they don't know what's being expected. That's where you've got to dig in is if they're not clear about the expectation then that's where we need to figure out what's going on. I just started to ask a lot of questions; I mean, it sounds really basic, but it just started with asking questions.

SW: How do you lead workshops with faculty and what do these workshops look like in the health sciences?

JD: One thing we bump into a lot—and I'm sure it happens in other disciplines outside of English or the humanities more broadly—but I've noticed a lot here is that faculty assume that students know what they mean when they ask for a particular kind of writing. They'll assign a literature review and a literature review in the sciences looks a lot different than a literature review in the humanities or in the social sciences. Even a literature review in nursing looks different than a literature review in the biomedical sciences. I mean, it's different expectations, and so I try to get them to see that they didn't always know how to do these things. The first question I always ask when I sit down to talk to faculty about teaching writing is I ask them to try to remember how they learned to write. The first thing. I just have them write for five minutes, just reflect on how did you learn to write for your discipline and at a graduate level. That's our starting point is to get them back in the head space of being maybe a first-year doctoral student or something and being asked to do these things that they didn't know how to do then. How did they get to where they are now, where they're in tenure track positions and they're publishing and they're doing these things? They're a research heavy campus because we have a lot of hard sciences research, and we bring in grants from the Department of Defense to do all kinds of health-related research. I ask them how they got to the point where they could even do that work. Once we can have that conversation, then they can start to see the way that they're asking for things that students maybe don't know how to do.

That's where we start from a lot of times. I also emphasize the way that scholars talk about the way that science writing is sort of invisible. In other words, there's sort of a sense or expectation that when we write in the sciences, we're just translating information directly to the page.

There's no rhetorical dimension to it as far as how it moves from what we know to what's on the page. It's just a straight translation almost. I try to get them to see that actually when they present it, they're making rhetorical choices. I try to get them to see that the way that an article is laid out, because they're pretty specific expectations in most science journals for that sort of thing. The way it's laid out, those are rhetorical choices. We are actually doing some interpretive work, we are making decisions about the way to present information and starting to get them to see some of these rhetorical dimensions that are across the discipline sort of invisible.

SW: Looking back at your grad school experience at TCU and thinking about where you are now in this academic support specialist position, is there something you wish you learned that would've helped prepare you more for health sciences writing?

JD: Yeah, that's a really good question because I shaped my program in the direction that I thought I was going to go. I had envisioned myself landing at a campus where I would be teaching composition, but really teaching literature as well, and on a smaller campus where I didn't envision myself at an R1. I didn't envision myself in a place where I'd be focused entirely on composition or literature. My intention going to grad school was to be a lit professor. That was where I was heading but I knew I'd always be teaching writing. I didn't force myself to explore some of the avenues in the different ways that we might teach writing when we get out there. I was thinking of Comp One, Comp Two, and that was it. I could have done more of myself because there's certainly more availability. If I'd known where I was going to land, I could have shaped it differently back then.

But I think that what happened at TCU, that was really useful and of course I had just have that experience and I'm sure that this happens in other comp-rhet programs at the graduate level was just an emphasis on that. If you like, how foundational it is to understand composition as a field of inquiry. That's important to think of it as its own thing. It's not something we do on the side, it's not something we do to augment or make it possible to teach other things, that it is its own thing. Being its own field of inquiry and research allows us the opportunity to explore and learn in ways that maybe we didn't consider in the way they provided just because of that sort of approach to it. It provided the tools I needed to then go track stuff down on my own later.

TCU's such a supportive environment. I really learned a lot about how I would want someone to respond to my writing and about how I would respond to someone's writing because of how well I was supported as a comp-rhet student and as a literature student. The best comment I ever got on a paper was from Linda Hughes who teaches Victorian Literature at TCU and she's an endowed chair. The best comment she ever gave me was I kind of half-assed an assignment and it was a short writing assignment and I'd kind of not given it the attention it needed. All she wrote on it was, "Your thoughts deserve better than this." It's a beautiful comment because she's saying what you're thinking. You've got some good ideas here, Jack, but they deserve better than the effort you've given here. I've put that away; that's how I think when I respond to student writing. I want to tell them what they need to know, but I want to be supportive at the same time. That's something I got from TCU that was not necessarily in a course, or it wasn't explicitly stated in a syllabus or something like that, but just the overall sense of tell them what they need to know and do it in a way that keeps them moving, right? We don't want to crush any souls. We want to keep people developing and getting better as writers. That's something I really took

away from TCU, but I could have pushed myself into technical writing and science writing and all those areas if I had known I would find myself in this office at this point in my life, but I did not.

SW: What are some advantages to having robust student support services in this kind of institutional context and what are some challenges you encounter as the assistant director?

JD: I taught as a grad assistant at TCU. I love working with students, and I miss being in the classroom because I really adore teaching and running a class. It's August, so everybody on my Twitter feed is like, "Oh my gosh, syllabus design, and all that kind of stuff." And I miss that stuff; I really enjoy putting a whole class together. But what I really like here is the chance to work with students. I do workshops and I do seminars. Most of my work is sitting down with people one-on-one to work on their writing. I really enjoy watching that growth, especially here in the health sciences. A lot of students walk in my door, and the undergrads are funny; they'll say, "Hey, now that I'm in my nursing program, I didn't think I was going to have to write anymore. And now I'm finding myself having to write." I really enjoy seeing students realize that they can get better, and they can grow, and they can become better writers. I love working with grad students and seeing a dissertation transform from just one more box that they have to check to something that they really are invested in because they like what they're doing. I talk a lot about the way that we're writing is a form of inquiry. We learn as we write. We talked a little bit about some of the cognitive research associated with writing and one graduate student said now she doesn't see it as just something she has to do to report what she's found. She sees working through her dissertation as a way to learn and grow as a researcher and a student, and I think that's really cool. I love that stuff.

The challenges are that the health science are, a lot of times, really siloed off from the rest. We need to work on interdisciplinary and interprofessional stuff here. I don't know if that's just our campus or if that's kind of a health sciences thing. I think there's a desire to do that kind of work, but it's sometimes just hard to know where to start. Everybody tends to keep to themselves to a certain extent. It's also challenging to get folks to see that there are other ways of writing that are valid and useful. It's really hard. It's not so much the students, but sometimes the faculty are not resistant in terms of not wanting to learn something or not wanting to do the work, but they very much are keyed in on, "This is how we do it." It's hard to get them to see. I've tried to pitch over and over again, "Hey, why don't you let me teach an intro to graduate writing in the health sciences class where I could hit some of these things? It could just even be a one-credit weekly seminar class where we just meet for an hour and talk through stuff, even a workshop kind of class." Their response is always sort of, "Hey, that's a nice idea," and we never move forward with it. It's hard to get them to see the value of some of the things that we in composition really value, the process like that. The process really matters. That's where we learn, that's where we not just learn how to write, but we also learn the material that we're writing about. We learn the content process really matters. For them, a lot of times, process seems like it's a series of boxes to check instead of a recursive process that we go through to gain deeper knowledge and grow in that way. When I have time to do it and work with a faculty member, then a lot of times we get to that point. But the initial response is sometimes a little bit resistant to that. That's fine; I mean, they don't know what they don't know. I don't know what they're doing either. A lot of times I sit down with the work that I'm seeing them writing and I just have to tell them, "I've got to

believe the science here because there's no possible way for me to provide any feedback on that." And that's fine. I don't have any problem with the fact that they just haven't thought about these writing concerns before. But I think everybody's so busy, schedules are packed, stuff is going on. A lot of times there's just a sense there isn't time to fit this one more thing in for either students or faculty, and that's definitely a challenge.

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