

## Episode 91: Jackie Hoermann-Elliott

### *Transcript*

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

I want to start this episode just by saying thank you. Thanks so much for listening to the podcast, for sharing this work with your friends, colleagues, students. It really means the world to me that you would take time to listen to this and support this project.

In this episode, I talk with Jackie Hoermann-Elliott about embodied cognition, the relationship between mental and physical activity, writing program administration, and teaching at Texas Woman's University.

Jackie Hoermann-Elliott is an Assistant Professor of English and the Director of First-Year Composition at Texas Woman's University (TWU), where she teaches and researches how writers compose through and with their bodies. Her book—*Running, Thinking, Writing: Embodied Cognition in Composition*—was published by Parlor Press in 2021, and her writing can be found in national journals—such as *Composition Forum* and *The ADVANCE Journal*.

Jackie, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: So you recently published your book, *Running, Thinking, Writing* (2021), which explores the relationship between mental activity and physical activity. What were your motivations behind this work and research? What do you hope that this book contributes to writing studies and the teaching of composition?*

*JHE: Of course, yeah. So my motivations are kind of interesting, and I would say they were self-serving at first. I noticed myself doing this thing when I would go run, and I would turn over words. I write about that a little bit in the start of one chapter, I kind of detailed my first run in Iowa, where I am turning over this idea for my thesis project. I didn't actually end up going that way with my thesis project, but I did later in my dissertations. So I'm at Iowa State University, and I'm thinking a lot about my writing while I'm running. I start to talk to other runners who are writers, who are doing the same thing. I just needed a way to kind of explain what happens in my brain when I run and then I write.*

*It started as this hunch, almost, and then it moved into, I was at TCU, or Texas Christian University, and I was taking the teaching composition theory class with Charlotte Hogg and she has this project called the "Pedagogical Interest Project." She says explore anything that you want, anything that's interesting to you, just have fun with it.*

*I said, I really want to understand better the role of the body in the writing process, and why composition studies isn't talking about that. Or at least not very much at the time. And then Carrie Leverenz, my dissertation director, really helped me take that project in and make it something completely different. So we actually started in the dissertation side of my research and all my projects, talking to CrossFitters, and soccer players, and marathoners, and champion*

female power lifters. Yeah, I was trying to get a really wide spread for all these different kinds of physical activity.

Christy Wenger was actually one of my participants, and she writes about yoga. She's got her book, *Yoga Minds, Writing Bodies*, and Seth Kahn loves running, and walking, and hiking. He was another one of my participants. And so what was really interesting to me, what kept coming to the surface, was that a lot of these individuals said they did their best thinking about writing, and coming up with ideas for inventing, when they were running or walking. That's when I kind of started to pay attention to that and think about how I bring it into the classroom.

I hope that the contribution it makes to the field is getting us to a place where we're thinking more in divergent terms, or more creatively, about how writers write. Especially first-year writers. But also restorative terms. Because I think that the work we do as writers is really hard, and it's really laborious. I think that we need to step back and take care of our writing bodies, just like we do our minds.

*SW: Jackie, can you talk more about this relationship between “moving bodies and writing bodies”?*

JHE: Yeah, so I like to think that all writing bodies are moving bodies. And all bodies, of every ability level, of every kind of intersectional way that you can think about a body, is writing and moving. I guess on a micro-level, I like to think about it in terms of, if I'm here sitting at my desk and I'm writing, I'm fidgeting, or I'm holding something, or I'm switching the cross of my legs, or I'm doing something when writing is or isn't going well, that is a physical manifestation of how I'm processing whatever I'm grappling with in writing.

I've also noticed, and I write about this a little bit in the book, I had a colleague at Iowa State University where I did my Masters, and he would just get up and he would pace. I would watch him with great curiosity. I mean, this guy would just walk around the room, and go back and forth. And I would just...I asked him one day. I said, “Are you okay? You need some help?” And he said, “Yes, I'm getting all these great ideas.” That was really surprising to me. But some people do that, they've got to get up and move. So that's the micro level, is how I think about it. But then the more macro level is okay, how are we using, very intentionally, all of these physical activities that support our creative development, or our development as writers, to enhance our writing process, and our output, and things like that?

Then if we can kind of take that and un-harness it, we can benefit in really wonderful ways. So I talk about that and connect it to embodied cognition because I see embodied cognition as being really important in here. It took me a long time to kind of find that, because composition theorists aren't really talking about embodied cognition as much. I think that there's a lot of benefit to looking beyond the discipline for ways and theories for explaining what's happening when we write.

*SW: As a teacher and researcher, you advocate for creative and embodied learning. What practices or strategies do you use to center these values in the classroom? What kinds of*

*assignments, or materials, or practices help you do this embodied learning work in first-year writing?*

JHE: That's a great question. I will say that I do a lot of things. I throw a lot of stuff at the wall and see what sticks. So we've tried different things, we've tried walking meditations. A lot of students really appreciate the mindful activities and the breath work that I introduce at the start of class. I call that our mindful moment of the day. So many of them really deeply enjoyed it, but because they were in this kind of digital, many tabs open in their brain, but in their browser context, it was really challenging for them. I think that making space for that kind of work, that kind of contemplative learning, is really important and really helped them in those Zoom learning environments. And so I'll keep doing it.

I also do writing logs with them. That's something I'm kind of coding through right now. I have a lot of data on embodied writing logs where I'm asking them to compare over a four-week period, how did your writing go today? What kind of progress did you make? And then, how did your body feel today? How did your mind feel? Seeing if they have any insights or reflections from either. And so, again, that's a reflective, metacognitive practice that we keep for a good portion of the class. We have a lot of conversations about what our bodies can teach us when our writing is or is not going well.

*SW: Jackie, you used the word “restoration” earlier. I imagine embodied cognition and restoration are a part of your teaching philosophy. But you're also the Director of First-Year Composition at Texas Woman's University. Are these elements or core principles, and also maybe you could talk more about what that looks like, so the intersections between teaching and administration, and your priorities and vision as a writing program administrator?*

JHE: Gosh, restoration is really important to me as a WPA. We talk here a lot about self-care with our GTAs and my graduate students I'm working with. We just wrapped up teaching our WPA course. I say we, which is Dr. Rachel Daugherty, she's Assistant Director of our writing program here, and she's wonderful. We hold each other really accountable for self-care and that kind of work. I think it's especially important with our students, because they have a lot that they're up against sometimes. We are a minority-majority institution. We are largely Hispanic. We also have many Black students. Our students are 44% Pell Grant eligible here. Our students face a lot of food insecurity. So my number one priority becomes, how do I help these students? And how does writing become something that helps them, rather than holds them back or becomes an academic roadblock?

We also have a ton of working parents. We have veterans. We have former foster care youth. I think like many institutions right now, have a growing number of co-requisite students. Because a lot of testing and different measures of assessment were waived during COVID, and are still being waived. So all of that is to say, I think that we try really hard as a program, in everything we do, our curriculum revision, which we're just putting the finishing touches on right now, in our writing of grants to keep diversity, equity, and inclusion at the helm at all times. Because that is our driving force, that is what we need.

We're also writing a ton of grants right now. We just won one actually to write an OER textbook, which we're really excited about. And then, yeah, we're writing other grants for more innovative approaches to co-requisite models and community partnerships.

And then we are also trying themed courses. I am trying, for the first time this fall, to teach a course that is funded through an NEH grant. Some colleagues in my department won that, to investigate the history of this little park in Denton called Quakertown. It's a really compelling story, how in the 1920s the city passed a bond to essentially kick out this community of free Black citizens and some of that was related to the fact that Texas Woman's University is right up the hill.

People don't want to grapple with this messy side of our history, but my institution is working really hard to rectify, I think, some wrongs. To have open conversations about how we can contemporize the challenges of the past, and the things that have defined higher education, and different roadblocks to different students. How do we talk about them openly right now, and not sanitize the history for students today? And then use that as a critical lens for understanding communication and things like that.

So those are just some examples that really stand out to me as being really important. I hope that five years from now we've made a lot of progress, and that we are better for our students. Because they bring a lot of needs, and they have a lot of compelling interests, and they keep us really humble and working really, really hard.

*SW: You mentioned student demographics and just to follow up on that Texas Woman's University is 85-90% female. I'm interested in hearing how this influences and informs pedagogy and curriculum. I'm thinking about how this student demographic might open possibilities for intentional first-year writing curriculum development on intersectionality, gender studies, and feminist pedagogies and frameworks, for example. How does your institutional context inform your approach to teaching or administration?*

JHE: You're right. Sometimes we're 88%, sometimes we're 86% female. But we are the nation's largest university, now university system, primarily for women in the country. We recently became a system, legislation was passed in the summer, and we do have a Dallas campus and a Houston campus. So we're pretty big, and we have a lot of women here. But we also have a growing number of men. We have more men, or people who identify as male, coming in every year. And many more non-binary students. I think our non-binary students we see increasing because word of mouth gets around that we are a really safe and supportive community and environment.

The campus culture here is such that we have a little Greek life, but it's mostly sororities. It's just really different being in our classroom. I think when people start here on day one, they're always a little bit mesmerized about how attentive, and kind, and hardworking the individuals that are here in our classes, and enthralled in them. It's unlike a lot of institutions that I've worked at that have had a much bigger Greek culture, or were more male, or things like that. I think that changes the faculty culture and climate.

Our nickname is a campus with heart. I think that's really true. There's a lot of good work that goes on here. But in an intersectional sense, we merged my department, which was English, Speech, and Foreign Languages. We actually merged recently with our Multicultural Women and Gender Studies Program because we were doing a lot of shared work already. And now we are the Department of Language, Culture, and Gender Studies. So we're kind of undergoing an identity change for us that we're excited about.

Because we were doing so much shared pedagogical work anyway, and I think we're going to be really, really strengthened by our colleagues in Multicultural Women and Gender Studies, and the things that they're teaching us. I'll just say that I think here, working with our grad students, there's a really, really strong feminist ethic of care that happens, and it's really palpable. I really enjoy just being here. And we're a state institution, we're not without our challenges. But everybody here is really wonderful, and our students just drive our passion and our overwork a little bit sometimes.

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