

Episode 145: Jason Evans

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Jason Evans talks about teaching at Prairie State College, teaching developmental writing, advice for first-time developmental writing teachers, translingual practice, and code-meshing.

Jason C. Evans is Professor of Developmental writing in English at Prairie State College in Chicago Heights, Illinois. His work has appeared in the edited collections *Writing Placement in Two-Year Colleges*, and *On Teacher Neutrality*, as well as *BWE*, *Open Words*, and *Teaching English in a Two-year College*. Jason's research examines the relationships between composition, racial identity, and social class and community college writing programs.

Jason, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You are a professor of developmental English and writing at Prairie State College. Talk to me more about Prairie State, the institutional context and students, and your position and responsibilities.

JE: Yeah, thanks. I've been teaching at Prairie State for a long time, since 2003, and I've seen a lot of big changes in our college. We're a predominantly Black community college in Chicago's south suburbs. We have a large and growing Latinx population at our school, and we have a fairly significant number of white students. It's not zero, but they're in the minority. So it's an interesting mix of people to get to work with and to have in the classroom. Our average age used to be 27. I think it's gotten a little younger in the past couple of years, but it remains also very age-diverse in a really exciting and rewarding way.

But the biggest change that I've seen in my time there has been the drastic decrease in developmental writing sections. I was hired as a professor of developmental writing in English with the idea that I would teach at least half of my load as basic writing classes or developmental writing classes, and now I can't make load that way anymore. So I'm just teaching transfer-level classes. We have a lot of theories about why that's the case, like why we have so many fewer sections. I mean, we're down to two sections of developmental writing in our department, and my colleague teaches those, and I kind of miss them, but I wish him well.

So when I started we had, I don't know, probably 30 or more sections, and then that has been decreasing, sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly, over the years. I think a lot of that had to do, a couple years ago we changed our placement tool and made it, I think, easier for incoming students to sound like college writers. And so we started placing more people into English 101 that way. I also think our high school teachers are really great, and we've had a building partnership with them over the years that probably has helped students become more ready for college writing and ready to show that they're ready for college writing.

So, I miss teaching developmental writing. It's a great space, I think, in a lot of ways. In other ways, it's kind of a weird space because the institutional politics of developmental writing and higher education, but for me it was a space where students came in really open to learning, really willing to work on their writing and open to what the class had to teach them. That was what I particularly liked about it. And then they'd feel often surprised that they liked it so much and that they felt like they were competent with it. So, it was always fun for me to be there to witness that and to be alongside them when they were having that experience.

SW: Jason, can you talk more about how you approach teaching developmental writing? What are some pedagogies and practices you use in that class? And what are some key values and objectives you have in teaching developmental writing?

JE: Yeah, good question, Shane. The last several years that I taught it, we had developed an accelerated learning program version of developmental writing. And so I had a very small class size, like a cap of 10 in the class, and my goal as a teacher was to kind of make sense of that in the classroom, which was to create a community of writers and make it so that it became a space where we could try things out. And eventually the most successful I would feel was sometime in the semester, somebody would come to class and say, "Here's what I was trying to do in this paragraph. What do you all think?" And then one, genuinely ask that question and be open to having it responded to, and the people in the class knew what to do with that question also. And it's so exciting, and I think what a lot of us as writing teachers love and look forward to. So I think that was made possible by the small class size and making me really, I mean, you definitely can't lecture. I don't like to lecture anyway, but you definitely can't lecture with 8 to 10 students in the room. It never made sense to me.

But what you can do is develop a lot of trust and the kind of space where people are open to hearing about their writing and understand that there's not one right way to write it, and they kind of feel the freedom of that and the way that the space kind of encourages that, tapping into students' willingness to be present and not anything necessarily that I would create, but rather making possible the kinds of things that students would value in any case, like being seen and contributing to other people's learning as well as having other people contribute to yours. So I would praise... Probably in a podcast, I can't say shit, but praise the shit out of people, especially early on in the semester, who are willing to let us look at your paper in a group, because to recognize that that takes some courage and be super grateful to people for that while also showing them right off the bat that this can be a little awkward, but it's not painful. We'll do as much building up and saying what we like about your essay or your draft, whatever we're looking at, as we will about what we thought you could do differently or what we imagine you could do differently.

So, I think keeping the focus pretty positive, especially early on, and recognizing the kind of courage that it takes to be open about one's writing, but also eventually making that seem kind of like a normal thing, too, in this space. Hopefully it doesn't take a lot of bravery per se on a daily basis once we get going, but rather it seems more like a normal thing. And then some of the artificial things that I remember doing was asking each person to say something both for, "What did you like about this in particular? And you have to be specific, and you can't say the same

thing that the person before you said." And then, "What's something you'd want to hear more about?" And again, everybody has to say something pretty specific.

But in a group of eight people, every person can actually talk and contribute. And the writer, they begin to see, too, the writer can take it or leave it. If one person wants to hear more about something that the writer didn't really care that much about, it's good to hear, but... So I think it does also build a sense of... Having just that much diversity of opinion in the room also gives people a sense of ownership and that they can't possibly take all eight opinions into account, and so then you have ownership and nurtures that.

SW: You mentioned not having the opportunity to teach developmental writing now as much given programmatic changes and that you miss teaching these courses. What do you miss the most and what do you feel that developmental writing class offers that other classes, even other first year writing courses don't necessarily capture in quite the same way?

JE: Yeah, that's a nice question. I think one thing is the small class size. My class sizes aren't huge. Like the English 101 and English 102 sections that I teach right now are capped at 22, and I have, on any given day, I have 15 or 16 people usually. So it's not enormous, but it is large enough that it is somewhat difficult to make sure that each person has adequate air time in a 75-minute class. So I miss that. But I've tried, I think because I felt what was possible when each person does get adequate air time, I've really tried in my composition classes to create opportunities for each person to contribute, especially in a small group, but as much as I can in a large group setting too, to recognize each individual's contributions and also celebrate their contributions.

That's a value that I took from developmental writing classes as a kind of super necessity there and taken it into Composition 1, where it's not quite as... Students have a wider variety of experiences and experiences with writing classes and experiences with education, and so some of them are quite confident about their academic abilities already. Whereas in a developmental writing class, you have a smaller range of confidence, and especially because they've been constituted as developmental writers before they even get to the class, there's already kind of something to work with and against, as a teacher.

SW: How would you mentor someone who's about to teach developmental writing for the first time? What advice would you give them after 20 years of teaching developmental writing?

JE: Yeah, I mean, I think it might depend a bit on the institutional context, but in general, I'd say anytime you set foot into a developmental writing classroom, your students have already been given a message by the college, and that's something to try to take in and hold in a deep way and remember it as you come into every class, that you are going to have to express conscious optimism [inaudible 00:10:58] abilities as thinkers and as writers at pretty much every moment in the class. And I like being oriented that way. I'm not sure I like the institutional context about having to think that way, but I think it's a really good way to approach any class, but particularly composition classes or writing classes, to have to think I really am optimistic, and not just make it vague, but as specific as I can be. Like, "Here's a way in which you are doing it. Here's a way in which you're contributing to other people. Here's a way in which you are performing it

yourself," and be specific and like I said, conscious, explicit about that kind of belief in the student's abilities.

I didn't get any training in composition or rhetoric before I began teaching. I had one class in my master's program on teaching in a community college, but it was focused on kind of broadly for humanities grad students. And it was a helpful class about pedagogy and orienting people to these discussions, but not such a super helpful class preparing one for day one. So I've learned more, both on the job and from going to conferences and then trying to catch up on the books that I should have read. It took me too long to discover the Two-Year College Association and the Teaching English in the Two-Year college as a resource for this. I wish I would've encountered those organizations sooner because I think they tend to be pretty practice oriented and a good community to bounce ideas off of and share with.

A book that I don't hear that many people talking about at places like SEAS is the *College Fear Factor* by Rebecca Cox. It's a few years old, might be more than 10 years old now, but it's an ethnography of community college English classrooms and exploring students' feelings of fear and the way that that shapes their approach to the classroom. I think the subtitle is something like "How professors and students misunderstand each other." So that to me is a helpful thing for grad students to read and begin to understand, because grad students are generally people who had a good time in school and who have been affirmed by the educational system. And it's hard to appreciate, I mean, I think it remains hard to appreciate what it feels like not to have that kind of uplift and wind at your back from the system.

SW: Jason, you have a chapter called "Living in Contradiction: Translingual Writing Pedagogies and the Two-Year College." Can you talk more about this chapter and what you're encouraging teachers and researchers to consider with translingual practice?

JE: Thanks for asking about this chapter, Shane. It's kind of fun. And it was fun because it also made me go back and look at it and think about what's changed for me in the past couple of years. So it's in a collection, *On Teacher Neutrality*, edited by Daniel Richard, and my chapter is focusing on how working-class students respond to language ideologies and the way that language ideologies are represented. And so I was thinking about the way in which in my classes trying to teach students about code meshing in English 101, trying to teach students about code meshing and the idea that multiple varieties of language are always present and always should be welcome and viewed as a resource. My students were suspicious of this idea and would kind of entertain it in a generous way towards me. And then at the end of thinking about it, say, "Okay, now teach me how to write correctly," as if to kind of reject and resist everything that we had just been writing about.

So this chapter is a way of thinking about that encounter and that resistance and wondering if what the students are hearing with things like, "All language is arbitrary and negotiated and shifting," if what they're hearing is also the language that the economy is also telling them, "Your position in the world is negotiated and arbitrary and tenuous and shifting." And so yeah, this chapter was exploring that as a thing for teachers especially to be sensitive to. I think, in part, it's the world has shifted a little bit. The first couple of semesters I taught after the George Floyd uprising protests, students were much more willing to try out and enact in their own writing

code-meshing, for instance, black students especially. Like before I would always get this kind of polite, "Well, thanks. Code-meshing sounds interesting. I kind of understand why it's important, but I need to learn how to speak the right way." Whereas after George Floyd, I had more students... I still get that probably from most students, but I have many more people that are willing to say, "Okay, I get it, and I want to see what this is like in my own writing in this class."

And for me, I've always invited students through those discussions to try it out in this class, and I didn't used to get very many takers. Now I'm getting more takers, but I think it is because of, I think, a positive shift in the way that people are unwilling to live with certain, I don't know if compromise is the right word, but certain ways of doing business that were acceptable in the past, I think are becoming less acceptable to more students. And I think that's a good thing.

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