

Episode 18: Jennifer Grouling

Transcript

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

For those new to the podcast, the purpose of Pedagogue is to promote diverse voices at various institutions and help foster community and collaboration among teachers of writing. In short, Pedagogue is designed to support teachers and facilitate conversations across institutions and positions.

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In this episode, I talk with Jennifer Grouling about writing assessment and teacher response to student writing. Jennifer Grouling is the Director of the Writing Program and associate professor of English at Ball State University. Her current research focuses on writing assessment, particularly the use of the AAC&U VALUE rubrics. She has also published work on general education assessment, teacher response and TA prep in journals such as the *Journal of Writing Assessment*, the *Journal of Response to Writing*, and *Composition Forum*. She is the author of the book *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*.

In this episode, we talk about how classroom writing assessment should complement pedagogical values, her current research on AAC&U VALUE rubrics and how technology influences how teachers respond to student writing.

Jennifer, thanks for joining us.

SW: Let's start by talking about writing assessment, specifically classroom writing assessment. How do you see writing assessment as complementary to your pedagogical values? That is, how does classroom assessment reflect your values as a writing teacher?

JG: One of the things I've been really interested in is the connection between institutions and individuals, and I feel like whether we want it to or not, it's always reflecting our own values, our institution's values, society's values. So I talk to my TA's a lot about that.

So actually it's interesting because now being WPA, I haven't taught first year writing in a few years, and now Asao came and talked to our writing program recently. I think I would need to rethink if I went back in the first year writing classroom soon about whether I'd want to use contract grading or portfolios or how exactly I would want to change up what I'm doing. Because to me one of the most important things in first year writing is just students getting an awareness of what writing is, what it involves, the labor it involves, but also that there's different genres, the questions they need to ask when they approach a piece of writing. Who's the audience? What's the genre? What's the purpose of it? Those kinds of questions. Definitely some exercises in class where you look at examples and pull out, "What are the features of this genre?"

I found when I do collaborative rubrics with them, they do pull out a lot of the same things I would. So usually if I do that, I'll kind of put up on the board what they say and then make it myself. I've definitely done that a lot for things like participation or group projects or that kind of thing.

What I had been doing was grading more holistically with just some criteria that weren't a rubric, but were just, "These are the things I'm looking for." Things like meeting the genre, approaching the audience, but I definitely have been thinking a lot more about the contract grading, how that might work. I think I'd have to wrestle with that a lot, but I think definitely, yeah, there's a big difference between what you're responding to and what you're assessing. And we talk a lot about that with the TAs as well. "Yeah, you can respond to grammar. You can help them work through these things and not grade on it." And I think just, too, that thinking about things. Like people say, "Well, we have to teach them the grammar because everybody else expects that." Say, "Well, this is how we change those values in society, too, is we fight back against that and change up how we're assessing it and talk about that with our students."

SW: I know your current research focuses on the use of the AAC&U VALUE rubrics. Do you mind explaining AAC&U VALUE rubrics and why and how they are used?

JG: Yes, so the AAC&U in 2009 came up with 16 rubrics. VALUE stands for Valid Assessment in Undergraduate Education and they basically have this set of outcomes that they had talked to employers about and then they came up with a set of rubrics to evaluate those outcomes. The rubrics themselves are not too bad. People in our field were involved in the written communication one, like Linda Adler-Kassner and I think Kathleen Yancey was involved in it, so some good people were really involved in it that fits the language of our field.

And the idea behind them originally was that different universities could adapt them for programmatic assessment, university-wide assessment. They weren't ever meant to be used in the classroom. In fact, I think they were mostly meant to be used for portfolios originally. And then what's happened is as time has gone on, now they have a thing where your university can pay money, they can send student artifacts and they'll be scored by an expert scorer based on the rubrics, and then we can all compare how our students do in writing.

Questions I've had and one of the concerns I've had is that these things like this are created by a national organization and then get passed down and they lose where it comes from. So a classroom teacher may get it from the assessment director at the university and then take it into the classroom when that's not what it was designed for, and not really know how to adapt it for their own pedagogy.

I first came across them at Ball State – we were using them as a university wide assessment of our writing intensive courses. And we had adapted the rubric very quickly really to fit here, and I had some questions about how we adapted it. So I was kind of looking at that and then I started this larger project kind of trying to see how were universities, what does it mean to adapt this national rubric? How do you change it?

SW: Yeah. So what did you come across through that investigation?

JG: One of the really strange things I came across was all these schools saying they adapted it, but when I looked at it, it looked nothing like the original rubric. I wouldn't think of it, like I was thinking I could trace the language and trace the revision.

And so what I realized through that is some of the people, especially non-writing people, this is their first exposure to writing assessment. So even the concept of a rubric, they think they got it from there even if theirs doesn't look anything like that. I think that's what's interesting to me is how something that was created nationally and yeah, we value local assessment, but if we don't have people who are involved in writing studies working with the national, then the local part can be problematic.

SW: In your article, "The Genre of Teacher Comments from Hard Copy to iPad," you talk about how technology allows writing teachers opportunities to comment in different ways, and how there's not much research that focuses on what that looks like or there's not much that studies the differences in response practices between hard copy and iPad collected papers. I was hoping you could talk more about that research and your findings. What did you notice between traditional response practices and comments mediated by technology?

JG: I set it up so it wasn't real student papers. I actually had a ton of fun writing fake student papers that I still use sometimes when I'm helping TAs learn how to grade and stuff and they're all excited when they learned that I wrote them. But I was trying to do that to kind of control and get high, medium, and low ones in each set so that I can control for it somewhat.

And I had the teachers, five different teachers, TAs and the contract faculty grade these and they'd graded five on hard copy, five in Blackboard and five on the iPad. Unfortunately, Blackboard changed some of their commenting features during the middle of the study. I ended up kind of throwing out that data because some people had access to marginal feedback and some people didn't, depending on when they actually completed it. I just compared the hard copy and the iPad.

And the iPad, they used Notability so they could type on it, they could highlight, they could write with a stylist in the margins. I thought that was particularly interesting because some of the teachers who favored handwriting could still take that sort of approach. And really what I found was there was not that big of a difference in their feedback. Length wise, it was similar.

I adapted the coding that Straub and Lunsford in their *12 Readers Reading* book used where they code for focus and mode. So is it posed as an imperative or a question or how is it framed? But also is it about an idea, is it about organization, global organization, sentence structure? What type of things? So I coded like that. Had a bunch of people code with me and then I got the help of someone who knew actual statistics to run the numbers of the codes. And the only thing of statistical significance was there were more imperative comments with the iPad, which was interesting. So more command driven comments.

And then when I kind of looked at it for individual participants, because I also did interviews with these people about their process in both modes, it really stood out on the ones that did not like the iPad. I'm not so sure that the iPad necessarily or that any kind of technology leads

towards a different type of commenting. But I think if you're less familiar or less comfortable with the technology, it leads you to potentially be harsher with students or frame your comments in a way that maybe is different than what you would in a technology you're more comfortable with.

SW: So it sounds like you saw how teachers' attitudes might change depending upon the technology they're using to respond to student writing or how their familiarity or lack thereof with technology affects their response. I'm curious about what sort of future directions you see response mediated through technology taking. What kind of work do you feel like needs to happen so that writing teachers can have a better grasp on the advantages and disadvantages of technology or using technology through response?

JG: I think we need to know a lot more about course management systems and how they constrain us – in terms of, I think we make a lot of assumptions about even how students navigate those systems, whether they even know where to look for our feedback, what they see, how they work with it. So I think... and then, of course all the issues with surveillance. I've noticed now we can just track, "How many times have they been on the site? How many times have they downloaded this or looked at this page?"

And there's rubrics on those now that you can build the rubric with the course management system. So I'm just really curious how that's affecting the way teachers, or will affect in the future how teachers respond to students, particularly if they're required to potentially use those for assessment. Like when we were using Blackboard, we pulled artifacts from Blackboard through Blackboard Outcomes and that means students weren't even aware that we were pulling their writing for assessment.

So, and then there's a push that like, "Well, if you aren't using Blackboard, you aren't compliant with the university. So you need to be collecting their papers on Blackboard so we can pull them for assessment. And then we can assess them using Blackboard outcomes." So the technology drives the response in the assessment in ways that I think we need to really question and look into.

I mean there's probably some advantages too. Like we were talking about Canvas. You can do audio feedback right there now. So I think there's not necessarily all bad, but I think it would be interesting to see more how that constrains and changes our feedback. I know one of the reasons I wanted to study the Blackboard feedback, and then was frustrated that they changed up the system in the middle of my study, is that I found myself, when I respond now, not giving as much in the way of marginal feedback. I mean, I think that can be good, but part of it is the difficulty of leaving marginal feedback on something like a course management system.

SW: Jennifer, as the Director of the Writing Program at Ball State University, how do you prepare writing teachers for the classroom? What strategies or tips do you give first year writing teachers?

JG: Yeah, sure. I think what I most try to give the new writing teachers is I mean definitely some tips and strategies, but habits of mind to think about pedagogy, how to think through the

decisions that they have to make, whether it's day to day classroom management decisions or planning decisions or philosophical decisions about grading. So while we have a few common assignments, I really want them to develop materials that they're comfortable with.

Teaching something that somebody else teaches either because you feel like you have to and that's just what everybody does, and you don't really understand why you're doing it, or teaching something someone else does because, "Ooh, it's really cool." I think that's not enough. You have to know why you're doing it and how it fits for you. So we talk a lot about that.

In my practicum class, the first half of the class we spend talking about what is composition. We read the *Naming What We Know* book, talk about what are the values of composition. We look at the called like *First Year Composition from Theory to Practice* where it has a bunch of famous scholars talking about their own pedagogy and their own syllabi for composition classes. And so I have them look at that and also try to get it contact there. "Where is this person teaching?" In a lot of cases, it's a famous person in the field who knows when the last time they actually taught comp was. So we talk about that too. Like, "Oh, they can do all these cool things, but you're going to be teaching two classes and doing all your graduate study. That's a great idea, but how's it going to work for you?" So we talk about institutional context, how that matters, workload and labor and how that matters.

And then they also do an analysis of their... They're working with a mentor during their first semester, so they're not teaching yet. They're working in the Writing Center and they're working with a mentor in their first year writing class. And so I have them collect all the materials that their mentor uses for teaching: syllabi, assignment sheets, grading sheets, and code those and see what values are coming up. And so we talk about how do you communicate what you value to students? Do the things coming up in these documents match what you think your mentor values based on sitting in on their class.

Sometimes they like that, sometimes they don't. But I really want to stress that developing these assignments and syllabi, ingraining criteria is an intellectual exercise that they go through and that they communicate to students and that shows who you are, just how you word things. And also we look for what are the values of our Writing Program there? How are those reflected? How do you balance those with what you think?

And then the second half has been on developing their own syllabi and assignment sheets and really talking through that process and doing that. And of course they can get inspiration and use things from other people, but again, I want them to stress like, "Why are you picking this one? How does it fit with your philosophy? How are you going to tweak it for your class?" So we talk a lot about that. My dissertation was on TAs, particularly TAs coming from other areas of English and how they struggle with maybe an identity as a composition teacher.

And one of my very favorite stories from that, from my interviews, was a student who was very frustrated with trying to create his own assignment sheet and said that he felt like he turned it in. He felt like the WPA said, "Draw me a picture of a horse." He turned in an assignment sheet, it was a picture of the horse. And she said, "Well, that's not a blue horse." And so then he redid it

and turned in a blue horse, and she said, "Well, it's not this." So in his mind, there was something exact that she wanted.

And so I keep trying to get to them like, "I'm not looking for the horse to look exactly this way, but I want to know, 'Why did you draw it this way? Why did you create the assignment this way? How does that fit with both our program composition as a field and you personally?'" So again, thinking of like, "Yeah, their individual values are important," but also, "well who are the students here? How does it fit here? What are our criteria?"

SW: Thank you, Jennifer. And thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.