

Episode 116: Jennifer Whetham

Transcript

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

In this episode, Jennifer Whetham talks about the Washington State community and technical college system, advocacy, policy development, community organizing, and antiracism.

Jennifer Whetham is a highly collaborative and deeply relational leader with over 20 years of experience building and maintaining strong relationships across Washington State through establishing, leading, and sustaining multiple communities of practice in the Washington State community and technical college (CTC) system, first as a faculty member teaching at multiple colleges (Bellevue, Clark, Highline, Green River, South Seattle), and then as a staff member at the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC). SBCTC— led by a nine-member governor-appointed board and headquartered in Olympia, WA — advocates, coordinates, and directs Washington state's system of 34 public community and technical colleges (CTCs). As a policy associate in the national Student Success Center, Jen's primary role is to provide vision and strategic direction for policy-level faculty professional development in alignment with the SBCTC Vision to lead with racial equity and create cultures of belonging for historically underserved students of color (HU-SOC).

Jen, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You serve as a policy associate in the National Student Success Center for the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, and you focus a lot on advocacy, policy development, and community organizing. I was hoping to give you some space to talk about this position as a policy associate and your role with the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

JW: Thanks, and it's really lovely to be here. Thank you for inviting me. I work at the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges and there's 34 community and technical colleges in Washington State, and the State Board has a number of different roles that we play. The number one is that the legislature allocates a certain portion to the community colleges, and so the State Board is sort of the conduit for the money, the money channel if you will. And then there's lots of departments and we handle different things like everything from cutting paychecks to looking at policy issues, policy matters.

And the way that our current executive director talks about it, talks about our work is there are certain things that we think are just better left up to the colleges that are better for local decisions, because every college is its own unique ecosystem, it's its own unique culture of teaching and learning, obviously the geography of Washington State is radically different. And so there's lots of things that we just leave up to the colleges.

And then there's other things where we, as the State Board, try to discern, when is it better for us to, I'll use that metaphor of community organizing, when does it make sense for the State Board to bring the colleges together and do something as a collective? For me in my role, I'm in the Student Success Center and not every state has a student success center, but some of the states have national student success centers and so I work in the Washington Student Success Center, which is focused around equity and specifically, how do we radically transform how higher education has approached its work to really think about, and this is where I'll say the State Board vision, which is to lead with racial equity, to create cultures of belonging for our historically underserved students.

Because obviously the way that we have approached higher education in the United States has not done that. It's not designed to serve. It's designed to serve one population. With that, I work in the Student Success Center and there are about, I think the most recent statistic is there's about 8,500 faculty who teach in all three mission areas, basic education for adults, academic transfer, and workforce, sometimes called professional technical. I do strategic direction for faculty professional development.

In my previous role, I was in the assessment teaching and learning department. It focused much more on that critical piece of faculty development. And now that I'm in the Student Success Center, it's focused a little bit more broadly on a major initiative here in Washington State called "Guided Pathways." And essentially, that is how the State Board is community organizing the colleges to just radically rethink how we do things to really rebuild our systems and structures while we are working within the old ones.

SW: So you've been organizing faculty across the Washington State Community and Technical College system to deconstruct English 101 using a community of practice model to support faculty in developing more antiracist practices and strategies. You're currently co-leading a major initiative funded by the Washington State Legislator with Asao B. Inoue, the Anti-Racist Curriculum Initiative. And you just concluded a workshop called "White People Working on It: Working Towards an Anti-Racist CTC System." Can you talk more about these two projects?

JW: I'll just say that when I started this job in 2013, it was very overwhelming and I was trying to figure out, what is my job? Because it's so big and so expansive and there's so many things that you could do. And I'll just say that, because I had been English faculty, I had a lot of already preexisting relationships. And also English faculty, we love to talk to each other. We always are like, "What are you doing in your class? And can I tell you about what I'm doing in my class?" And we, I think every discipline has its own unique beauty and its own kind of enculturation process that shapes you as a human, but English faculty, we're just the best and we're just always wanting to grow and change and evolve and try new things and just be on the cutting edge.

So there were a small group of English faculty who were continuously like, "Please can we be organized? Can we have regular gatherings?" And this was right around the time that we were really rethinking placement, rethinking portfolios, I mean we were just really challenging

everything. Do we need six levels of developmental English? Turns out no, but but those were radical conversations back in the day. And so, and I remember Jeff Klausman who teaches at Whatcom was like, you have to basically, if you're going to reform placement, you have to be a placement expert. If you're going to reform your portfolio assessment that's kind of a gatekeeper and not a gateway, you have to really, I mean it's a lot to know about that. And so again, how do you curate knowledge? How do you spread that knowledge? How do you learn from each other?

And so anyway, I worked really closely with Jeff and a lot of other faculty to start thinking about, what would it look like to gather English faculty together once a quarter? Just as a start, just to do something. We were very careful about collecting evidence from folks, so we would do our best to design an agenda that we thought would resonate with people's hearts and minds and practices, and really cultivate that wisdom sharing. And we actually had a number of communities of practice, one around directed self-placement, but the decomposing English 101 really took hold. So we would collect evidence from everybody, and it just turned out that what people really wanted to do as a collective was focus on equity.

And Jeff had been using Asao's scholarship to rethink their placement assessment and we did a couple of events where we were doing these topical introductions to Asao's work, but it's very deep, it's deep, deep work. We were able to successfully get some grant funding from College Park Washington to fund a pilot, and then the legislature noticed and paid attention. Our executive director asked for some legislative money, and so what I really want to say here is that this is the first policy level faculty professional development initiative that has ever been funded by the legislature. When I started, I remember just dreaming, what would it be like to have the legislature, the Washington State legislature actually invest in its faculty to really do something together as a collective and as a whole?

And so right now, based on the lessons learned from our pilot, which was a bumpy ride, we made a lot of mistakes, we learned a lot of things, there were a lot of successes, we now have 72 faculty participating, it's spanning six quarters. The faculty are currently working through ecology mapping. So they're mapping their current assessment ecology in their classrooms and they're going to pose what Asao calls anti-racist problems. And then they're going to implement labor-based grading as a way to shift their assessment ecology. We're not doing labor-based grading for the sake of labor-based grading. And if it's okay, I just want to say this one thing, one of the biggest lessons I've learned from Asao is that, and I've been guilty of this, as English faculty, and I don't know when you were trained, but I'm a woman of a certain age. And I was trained around the turn of the century and it was when portfolio assessment was really big and we were all like, "Portfolio assessment. It's a good thing. Just do it." And again, there was lots of pedagogy and scholarship around how to do it, but we still just, we were like, "Let's just implement that and then that'll be the magic wand. That'll fix everything."

One of the things that I've learned from Asao is, rather than just attaching to things as a good thing or a bad thing, that you really first map your ecology, pose a specific problem, and then make the change. It's a very different way of going about things, and so that's what we're

really...I think really at the end of the day, what I really want is 72 faculty who know how to map an ecology using the seven elements and who then know, they might choose to change the ecology doing something else, they might even go back to portfolio grading, I don't know, but to sort of retrain us as a discipline to not just seize the next thing. And I was totally guilty of this with DSP, when Compass went away and we were like, "It can't be Accuplacer. We can't just replace it with another standardized test." I was like, "DSP, DSP. It's a good thing." I wish I knew then what I know now. That's the Anti-Racist Curriculum Initiative.

I'm also part of a group of White folks who were asked by, we have a longstanding group of faculty and staff of color who have been community organizing for the last 30 years. And it's a specifically safe space for people of color to gather, to be away from the pervasive, toxic, stultifying Whiteness that saturates higher education, not just in Washington State, but across the nation. When we started putting this focus on equity, a lot of White folks started wanting to attend this faculty and staff of color conference. And again, that changed the mission, it changed the scope of the conference. They asked us if we would do an event specifically for White people to learn about why those spaces are really important for people of color and why it's not appropriate to have White people in those spaces. Again, that White people have a lot of work to do before they're ready to partner with folks of color to dismantle systemic racism. So we just finished up a one and a half day event around that, but I'll just say that it's an exciting time to be in higher education.

SW: Given your expertise and experience, what are some of the biggest challenges and some of the biggest joys to being a policy associate for the Washington State Community and Technical College system?

JW: Whew, okay. There's so many. I'll just say that right now, I think the biggest thing for me is I think it's really important to honor people for their labor. Anti-racist labor is emotional, it's taxing. Any sort of major curriculum reform is already really exhausting and faculty, we're all just so tired. I don't need to tell any educator that we are all tired and we're working in a system that's been broken for a long time and we're... anyway, I'll stop the tangent, I'll go back to the topic, which is, it's very important to me to honor people with funding. And honestly, the way that you get people to make space for this kind of work is to compensate them. I don't know any other way, right now the way that conditions are, to ask people to do this kind of labor for free. So I was so excited to get this money from the legislature because I could finally pay people to do this labor.

Shane, honestly, the hardest part is moving the money around. At one point I was ready to tear my hair out because I was like, "If we were going to pay the faculty \$1,000 a quarter, by the time we..." I'll just say, it's almost like money laundering. By the time it's gone through all the channels, the faculty would get \$250 of \$1,000 and I was like, "This cannot happen." I think for me, working in a bureaucracy that wasn't made for this kind of work, it's not nimble, that to me is one of the biggest challenges is, how do you get creative within these structures to make sure that you're really being in integrity with the work? The ahas, the lights that go on, and some of the

lights that go out, some of the lights that go on, thinking of people's brains and all these neurons firing, I'll just say we had a large group convening earlier in April, and we asked the faculty to map a sample assessment ecology.

I remember having this similar breakthrough when Asao did a similar activity with us, where, again, trained at the turn of the century, doing the best I could, read all the scholarship, did everything my graduate professors told me to do to be a good teacher, implemented portfolio-based grading so I was a good teacher, and it always felt like something was broken. It always felt like something was wrong. And I never really could quite figure out, why weren't my assignments working? Why wasn't my feedback working? Blah, blah, blah. And there was this aha after we did one of the activities with Asao where I was like, "I never knew it was White supremacy. What?" And again, it's the way that White supremacy permeates an ecology.

We had a lot of faculty come to that conclusion on their own and you should have...so we had 85 minutes in a breakout room, everybody's ecology mapping collaboratively, they're having these powerful conversations. And they came back to the large group breakout room and everyone was just like, it was like popcorn popping. People were just like, "Oh my gosh, and this thing and this thing and another thing." It just led to this really deep and profound conversation about just...the way that Asao talks about it is just, you implement labor-based grading to take grades out of the ecology and just how problematic grades are. I think it's something where every teacher knows A stands for arbitrary, and we do so much talking about what grades mean and we have rubrics and stuff like that. And it's a problem caused by White supremacy and we're not going to solve it with White supremacist methods. We have to completely transcend the system while we're working within it. And it's those moments where you just see a whole bunch of people having an aha together and you think about, this is how the world is going to change.

SW: Jen, this is my last question. I'm going to ask you to reflect just a bit. So you're a former community college faculty member and I think sometimes when we're in the classroom, we don't necessarily see all the things affecting our local ecology. I want to ask this question, thinking about two-year colleges specifically since that's what our conversation has been about, is there something you see now, given your position as a policy associate that you didn't necessarily notice as much as a teacher? Something that you can point to and say, "Hey, you know what? That was impacting my teaching and students, but I didn't necessarily know it until now?"

JW: One of the biggest things that I see now that I didn't see when I was a faculty member is how afraid everyone is of criticism and how deeply the whole academic enterprise is founded on criticism and founded on deficit and founded on, as Asao puts it, there's one standard that we've arbitrarily decided is the standard that we all have to meet, and at the end of the day, I don't think anybody really wants to uphold that. Even the people who might think that they want to uphold it don't really want to uphold it.

I think one of the biggest things is just becoming aware of that deficit framework and that deficit narrative and seeing how pervasive it is and resisting it and challenging it. And again, I'm trying

to think of a concrete example with this, but this is one of the things that I love about anti-racist work is it's totally around individual and communal capacity and that we've used this narrative of deficit to subordinate people and keep them down, and that there's a real invitation right now in a way that it's never been offered before and coming alive to that and becoming awake to it, I think, is a very powerful and beautiful thing.

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