Episode 74: Jesse Stommel
Transcript

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

Make sure to subscribe to the podcast on whatever platform you are listening on so you can get the newest episodes as soon as they're released. In this episode, I talk with Jesse Stommel about the purpose of first-year writing, ungrading, technologies, fostering collaboration and engagement, and the future of higher education.

Jesse Stommel is co-founder of Digital Pedagogy Lab and Hybrid Pedagogy: the journal of critical digital pedagogy. He has a PhD from University of Colorado Boulder. He is co-author of *An Urgency of Teachers: The Work of Critical Digital Pedagogy*. Jesse is a documentary filmmaker and teaches courses about pedagogy, film, and new media. He's online at jessestommel.com and on Twitter @Jessifer.

Jesse, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: A lot of our conversation is going to focus on teaching practices. So I think maybe the best thing we can do here at the beginning is talk about first-year writing and what you see as its main purposes. Of course, I think have to consider how each teacher is in a different institutional context. So it looks different, right? Some teachers might feel more pressure to meet specific program outcomes and objectives because other things depend on it like teacher evaluations or promotion, even program assessment and accreditation. But for you, what's the purpose of first-year writing and how do we navigate these institutional and program pressures as writing teachers?

JS: A couple of really interesting problems that you're pointing to. One, the precarity of teachers and the increasing precarity of teachers. If we think about something like first-year composition, a lot of first-year composition courses are taught by adjuncts, taught by graduate students. And then if we also think about the demands and pressures that are put on writing programs to be the sole place where students learn how to write. I mean, as long as I've been teaching writing and I constantly heard from other departments like...I love chemistry as a thing and I know some great chemistry teachers so I'm not bringing that up in any way to shame chemistry as a field.

But you might have a chemistry teacher who says, "Gosh, the students in my class don't know how to write. That's your responsibility to teach them. They can't show up in my class without knowing how to write. You're responsible for having them know how to write." A couple things that I think are problematic about that. One is the idea of someone "knowing how to write" as though writing isn't a dynamic thing that we're constantly learning. And also as though there is a "knowing how to write" that translates from one discipline to another, from one context to another.

Ultimately, those kinds of problems forced me to ask myself when I first started teaching first-year composition like, "What is this course even for?" I would say of all the courses that I've taught, if someone said, "Tell me the outcomes for first-year writing," when I first started, I

would have just been bewildered and said, "I have no idea. I have no idea why this course exists. I have no idea what it's supposed to do in the world." So ultimately my job as a teacher was to sit and think like, "What do I actually want this course to do or be?"

Other people have ideas about it, sure. There might be programmatic outcomes that I have to cut and paste into my syllabus, but ultimately it's me who has to sit and work with students over the course of a semester. You can't parrot teaching. Teaching is not something that you can just mimic. You can't be given a script and then do it and deliver to students. You have that idea of students bringing their full self. A teacher bringing their full self also means recognizing that my context is going to change what first-year composition is going to look like.

And what do I think it's for? I mean, ultimately, I think first-year composition is a space for students to get to practice. It's a writing playground. It's a place for them. It's actually the opposite of a high intensity, focus on outcomes space where they're supposed to know how to write at the end. This is a place for them to actually unlearn a lot of the things that they've learned previously. It's also a place for them to just play with the act of writing in lots of different forms and modes without a lot of pressure of achieving something specific at the end.

So I guess with something like first-year writing, I would say there really is no content in that course, aside from the person. That's the only content in first-year writing. I don't know that you get to specific content needs and writing until you get to much more advanced courses where students are learning things like the specifics of APA Style or the specific nuances and conventions of a particular genre. And at that point, sure, there's always content, necessary content in every course. With first-year writing maybe being the exception where I'm boldly arguing that there's no content whatsoever.

There's always some amount of content, but there's never 15 weeks of it. There's never two and a half hours a time, over 15 weeks of necessary content that someone has to get. There's always wiggle room. There's always space. And if it is jammed that pack and sometimes teachers will say, "Well, no, there's actually 30 weeks and I have to cut it down to 15. So how can I cut it down even more to have conversations with students about what movies they watched?"

The thing is that you can pack as much content into a course if you're not actually engaging students and getting them to read themselves in their world, none of that really matters. They're not going to take any of that away from with them. So the idea, "Sure, let's back 15 weeks of content and then just have no student remember it a year later." And we can just do that to high heaven and say that we're doing our jobs as teachers. When in truth, what we're doing is really failing to teach students.

SW: Jesse, I'm going to doing something I've never done before in an episode, but I might start doing it. You have 30 seconds. What does teaching mean to you?

JS: Teaching pedagogy is practice. So it's a recursive move from the work of teaching, the practice of teaching, and then the theory and thinking about teaching. And to me, the process is recursive, meaning that in every moment inside of a classroom you're both doing the work of

teaching, and then also thinking about and reflecting on the act of teaching, ideally making small changes, small maneuvers right in the classroom.

I think that the most important bit of this is to bring students into that thinking and that reflection so that you're producing the act of teaching and then also talking to students and bring them into that work, so that they become teachers themselves and are contributing to the pedagogy of course.

SW: A lot of your teaching and research also focuses on ungrading. What is ungrading and what are the beliefs or the principles around this approach to teaching and assessment?

JS: Yeah. I haven't put a grade on a piece of student work in over 20 years. That's not entirely true because there've been times when I've co-taught with someone where we had to come to a grading approach together. So then I have done the act of putting it, but in my own classroom I've never done it. Ultimately that really arises out of some of that very foundational thinking that I was doing about pedagogy. Thinking alongside people like bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Peter Elbow, John Dewey, Virginia Woolf. And thinking about how does this work actually intersect with or is it even compatible with the kinds of relationships that we often create with students in classrooms?

The kinds of hostile relationships that reduce their agency that do not bring their full selves into the work of teaching and learning. So there's a couple of pieces that I wrote with Sean Michael Morris cheekily titled, one is called "If Paulo Freire Made a MOOC, a massive open online course," and another one is called "If bell hooks Made A Learning Management System." In some way, I say cheekily because Paulo Freire wouldn't make a MOOC. bell hooks wouldn't probably make a learning management system, and it's a little bit odd for me to imagine that I would know what that learning management system would look like if she did build it.

So it's thinking about these things next to one another. If I think about some of my basic pedagogical principles, something like start by trusting students, bring students as full agents into the pedagogical approach of the course, and then you put that alongside our standardized quantified grading systems—These don't live in the same universe. So ultimately I didn't grade from the start of my career. I've found ways to bring students into the grading, the assessment of the course. I was required to put a grade on their transcript at the end of the semester, but I have them doing most of the grading, them doing most of the assessments, both individually and in conversation with me and in conversation with their classmates.

I did that for the last 21 years and really in the last 10 years is when I have started to push myself to not only re-investigate, re-interrogate my own pedagogical approaches, but also to do that more publicly, to do that work more publicly. I only started writing publicly about my pedagogy really in the last 10 years. So there's a whole 10 years of my career where I was a classroom teacher and the people I was having those conversations with were my students.

In the last 10 years, I really have felt a need to create larger conversations because I felt like I don't want to just engage with and impact the students in my classrooms, but I also increasingly do a lot of faculty development working with other teachers. Recognizing that there's a larger

culture in education and in higher education in particular that I want to push on and prod at in order to try and make some important, necessary change.

I've seen in the last 10 years grading become even more quantified, even more standardized, even more dehumanizing in part because some of these technologies that we use. The learning management system reduces students to rows in a spreadsheet. It reduces their work to columns in a spreadsheet. So pushing on this very publicly has become increasingly important to me because that's how I feel like I can best advocate for students and also advocate for other teachers.

SW: I'm going to give you a scenario, which has probably come up in one of your faculty development workshops. So let's say someone raises their hand during a Q&A about ungrading and says something like this: "So I agree with you that it's really good to problematize systems. And assessment has a lot of issues and problems. I co-construct rubrics with students and I provide substantial feedback on their writing, but I also assign a grade. I have a revision policy where students can revise their work and they can resubmit for a higher grade. I collaborate with students all the time. So we're doing a lot of the same things, but I'm assigning a grade. Is that bad?"

JS: Well, I get the question a lot with reference to something like grades, but also with reference to technologies. It's not the tool, it's the user. It's not the learning management system, it's how you use it. It's not the pedagogical approach, it's the person, it's the teacher. It's not the lecture, it's how we use lectures in classrooms. And ultimately, I would say that it's probably the worst thing that you can do in a critical pedagogy, which is to say that tools are ideologically neutral. Ultimately, all of our tools have ideologies baked into them. Whether this is the chalkboard, whether it is the learning management system, whether it is grades as a system, whether it is the ABCDF system, whether it's the 100% scale, whether it's norming grades, whether it's curves within STEM classes or required curves within law schools.

All of those things have ideologies baked into them. I often get back, "Well, it's not Turnitin. There's nothing fundamentally wrong with the software Turnitin or with remote proctoring software. It's really just how you use them." And ultimately, we have to draw a line somewhere and we have to be able to point to something like Turnitin, like ProctorU, like Proctorio and say, "No, these tools are fundamentally broken at their core." And ultimately I would say that is what is true about grades, they're fundamentally broken at their core because they attempt and imagine that they could replace students with numerical scores, replace student work with comparative quantitative analysis.

Imagining that one student gets a 93, another student gets a 95, and that says something about them. That's broken for me because it's pitting students against each other. The only thing it's successfully doing is ranking students against one another. Something like feedback and grades used as a feedback mechanism, well, the truth is grades are a really terrible feedback mechanism. They don't function. They don't tell people much of anything. What does a 93 tell a student versus the other student who got a 95? It only tells them that they got a lower score than the person who got a 95 and students internalize and emotionalize these scores to such a great degree that really what it tells them is, "I'm not as good of a human as that person who got a 95." So it's

not just the grades that are broken at their core, but it's how our system has used them over the last 100 years.

Another thing that I often push back when I get those kinds of questions is that there's this idea that grades are just inevitable and that grades are, of course, we would grade. We've always graded, but the truth is no, we haven't always graded. Grades are a relatively new technology and they have a very short recent history depending on what we're talking about. It's a history of about 100 years, especially if we're talking about the acceptance of numerical systems or the letter grade system, wide acceptance of those systems wasn't really there until the mid-20th century. So we're really talking only about a 70-year history where these were widely used and proliferating in more than 50% of the classrooms.

SW: I want to focus on the values of ungrading and contract grading, which often include promoting student agency, listening, inclusivity, compassion, and accessibility. And I want to take the last question and turn it just a bit to focus on the values and the student. So instead of a teacher asking something in a Q&A about grades, what about a student saying that they want to stick with a traditional grading system in class? I'm thinking about how contract grading, one of the affordances is the power to negotiate, right, so student agency. Students often have the power to negotiate their labor standards or what the contract looks like. So what would you say to the student maybe in those first couple of weeks that says, "You know what, I'm good. I don't want to use the grading contract. I'll stick with traditional grading. I'll stick with what I know since I'm only going to be in this class this one semester and since most other classes use a traditional system."

JS: Well, it depends on where and how that conversation is happening. Because the truth is if you go into a room full of students, if you go into a room full of teachers, if you go into a room full of critical pedagogues and you say, "Would you like to be graded in the way that you've always been graded or would you like this other alternative system, which you don't yet understand, and that is somewhat bizarre to you? Do you want the status quo or do you want this alternative approach?" The vast majority of people will choose the status quo.

So ultimately that's not a question that I think is appropriate to have with students right out of the gate and here's why. It's because part of the reason that people will choose the status quo is because they're afraid a rug will get pulled out from under them. There's such a hostile relationship created between students and teachers by our educational systems. This doesn't mean that I think that students and teachers are necessarily in hostile relation to one another. It means the system sets them up to be in that relation, and we actually have to resist that in order to not end up in that relationship.

The learning management system creates a very hierarchical space that is constantly reminding students that they're the student and teachers that they're the teacher and have power. So students are rightfully afraid that a rug is going to get pulled out from under them. And ultimately, if they're worried about that, they would rather be standing on the rug that they stood on before that they understand. They would rather be looking at the ground that is the ground that they've been on for most of their educational careers.

So ultimately, the first thing that we have to do is make sure that students understand that we're not going to pull a rug out from under them. That means developing trust from day one. That means creating a space of conversation. Usually that means not talking about the syllabus on day one because the syllabus is not the ground. It shouldn't be the ground. The ground is the relationship, it's the community that we formed. And so ultimately that community has to be there. I've actually learned over the course of my career while I talk to students a lot about my pedagogical approaches, I don't front load that. I don't try and talk about the syllabus on the first day. I don't talk about the assessment approach of the class until students start bringing it up, which means that I'm really not talking about grades or assessment until week four of a 15-week class because that's when students start to go, "Oh, wait, there's something different going on here. What is it that we're doing?"

But that's exactly why I think that conversation is most successful. So the truth is, if you ask that on day one, a whole bunch of students will say, "No, no, no. I just want grades." You ask that on week four and you have a conversation with students about it after you have a community that's formed, then students don't pick that anymore. So ultimately, I try and create a space for students feel like they have agency and autonomy, but there's some things that I still am in charge of, if you will. And one of the things that I'm in charge of is that the status quo is not an option. That's the one hard line in my class. Let's take the status quo off the table, and then almost everything else is up for us to decide together as a group.

SW: I'm interested in hearing more about the community-building practices you use in your writing classes.

JS: Yeah, I mean, there's techniques that you can use and this for me is probably the hardest part about teaching. It's something I've had to learn over 20 years, especially as an introvert. It doesn't really come naturally to me to build community, to create space for a community. I come from a family of extroverts so they taught me pretty well. I can definitely go through the motions, but to really start to become a community facilitator requires me to do practice. And what I've found is that there aren't activities or exercises. There's no secret set of 10 things that you can do.

Ultimately, it's about talking to students. It's about forgetting that there are activities and exercises that you have to do on any individual day and coming in and saying, "Hey, how's everybody doing? What's going on for you? What movies did you see last week?" I mean, it's whatever that conversation is. And to me, when I know that I've gotten it right is when we're just having a conversation in those minutes before class starts, and then I look over at my watch and we're five minutes into class and talking about the texts or talking about each other's writing. And we never had to have that moment where we said, "Okay, let's get started."

The key is just talking to people and meeting people as full humans, which means necessarily letting go of the idea that there's content to cover and realizing that the content of the classes— this comes from a friend of mine, Dave Cormier, who writes about the community as curriculum—that essentially the curriculum is not the content of the class, that the curriculum is the people in the class. So this also means having hard conversations about the full, sometimes messy selves we bring into the classroom. It means talking really frankly about what's going on in our lives and how we're doing.

This could be easier in a writing class because often we're having students write about themselves or their lives, or at least write from their own authorial voice or their own authorial position. But I really think in any class, making sure that what we're front loading is our humanity. It doesn't mean putting students on the spot and making them divulge personal things. It also doesn't mean forcing myself completely out of my comfort zone. I still think boundaries are important and boundaries are especially important for marginalized people. But it's about as much as possible doing what bell hooks says, "Showing up to the classroom as our full selves."

SW: I say this somewhat jokingly, because there's always an article or trend online that says something like 10 steps for fill in the blank, or 5 strategies for success. But what are your keys to engagement? How do you engage students or how do you build a community of learners?

JS: I mean, ultimately, I would say and I say this maybe cheekily, but also in full sincerity. When anyone ever asks me, "Well, what are your top five tips? What are the three things that you can do?" My first one that occurs to me is stop asking other people for tips. Recognize that what happens in your classroom is going to be idiosyncratic. You have different students than I do. You are a different human being. You bring a different body into the classroom. What happens in that classroom is going to be fundamentally different. There are no three tips that will work for every teacher in every context.

Some first-year writing teachers are given stock syllabi. I was actually given a stock syllabi the first time I taught first-year writing and told I couldn't change anything. It had a line for me to handwrite my name in on the top, which I just thought was super bizarre because here you got this printed syllabus and I can handwrite my name on the top, and then I was told I couldn't change anything. It was absolutely absurd. The idea that that could somehow form the basis of the class was ridiculous. I guess what I would say after that is, yes, there are specific things I do. But let me give you an example of creating engagement and then just push on why it can't be universalized.

Something that I started doing really early on in my teaching, a couple different things. Because I was an introvert. I'm less of an introvert now. I think teaching for so many years has turned me into an extrovert. I would walk into class and I would handwrite something on the board. It didn't matter what it was. I just needed to have my back to the students and be facing the board, and looking like I was occupied with something. The reason I did it was so that I could overhear the conversations that were happening behind me. Because ultimately that hum of the room and understanding who your students are, it's not necessarily always about asking each individual to tell you something. It's about getting a sense for the shape of the room that you're in, the shape of the conversations that are happening in the room. So that helped me.

Another thing that I would do is when I sat down in the room, I would sit down on the edge of the table. So instead of sitting behind the table in a chair, I would sit on the edge of the table and swing my legs. And to me that was a performative gesture. It was also more comfortable for me honestly, but it was a performative gesture that was basically signaling to people this is going to be a different kind of space. Power is going to work a little bit different in this space.

Another thing that I would do is when I was still passing out paper syllabi, I would stand at the door sometimes and pass the piece of paper and say hello to each person and make eye contact. Those things helped me, but if we look at one like sitting on the edge of the desk and then we think about power dynamics and marginalized people. That's not going to work for everybody. That works for me because I'm in a very specific body. And honestly it works in part because I'm both in a white male body, but also because I'm in a gay body, an LGBTQ body, a queer body. There's a different kind of dynamic, a different kind of emotional relationship that happens in the body that I'm in.

So I wouldn't say to everybody, "Hey, sit on the edge of the desk and swing your legs." I was also teaching in Boulder, Colorado where I was sitting on the edge of the desk in shorts and flip-flops because that was part of the culture of teaching. When I taught at Georgia Tech, there was a very different way I had to modulate my behavior. I still wanted to create the same feeling, but I couldn't achieve it in the same way. Ultimately, that's what I would say is there's little things that work, but what's important is hearing three things like that. And then figuring out like, "What's going to work for me? What's going to work with my students? Who are my students? What kinds of things are going to work with them? What kinds of things are going to work for me?"

Because of course, different teachers want to set boundaries in different ways. So engagement is about recognizing where our boundaries are and what we want to bring to the relationship, and also recognizing where our students are and what they can or want to bring to the relationship.

SW: This is my last question. What would you like to see education become? What is the future of higher education?

JS: It makes me think about it like what might Freire's answer for that be? And there's lots of different possible answers he might give, I think the guy wrote a lot of books. But the thing I was immediately thinking about was his idea of problem-posing education, that education isn't necessarily about finding solutions. It's not about content. It's about having people be readers of their world and problem-posers. Which mean ultimately he wanted the students in his classroom to learn how to both read their world, but also make change within their world.

And if I had to say what I want to see education do is, I want students to be more and more engaged in building and shaping their own educations. I have seen over the course of the last year, I've seen us actually take a big backward step. I've long said some version of we need to stop having conversations about the future of education without students in the room. Over the last year, I've seen a lot of institutions scrambling, a lot of administrators scrambling, a lot of teachers scrambling to figure out how to make this whole pandemic pedagogy thing work.

I have not seen nearly enough town hall style conversations with students, individual conversations with students, letting go of curriculum and making the focus of an entire semester student learning. Because suddenly we're all having to re-figure out how we do any of this work. Instead, what I've seen is a lot of attempts to pivot, to take business as usual and put it on a new platform. And then now what I'm seeing at the tail end, I say tail end to the pandemic, but I say that with that in quotes because there is no tail end of the pandemic.

What we're realizing is that a lot of the things that this has exposed have been ongoing even before the pandemic, and we'll continue even after that. Students certainly are experiencing acute trauma because of the pandemic. What I've found this year has exposed more than anything was all of the traumas that students were bringing to the classroom, even before the pandemic. And the idea that we can just pivot back to business as usual, the institution where I'm still teaching some courses, University of Mary Washington, they say, "Nope, it's going to be 90% back in the classroom just like it used to be."

And it's asinine. It's asinine to imagine that we can just pivot. I mean, that we could have meet and tightly pivoted in the first place and that we can meet and tightly pivot back, and all with very little effort to fully engage students in thinking about and working through the problem of what education can and should be.

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