

Episode 8: Jessica Nastal

Transcript

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

In this episode I get to talk with Jessica Nastal, one of the friendliest, most genuine people I know. I met Jessica in Savannah, Georgia at the 2013 CWPA conference and we've stayed in touch over the years. Her passion for teaching at her two-year college, her work on writing assessment and placement, and her support for her students and colleagues is inspiring.

One thing I really admire about our conversations is how we always talk about our kids. That's usually the first thing we talk about. She's always interested in Rose and Elle, my two-year old and nine-month-old. And I always want to hear about Elise, her almost four-year old. Jessica is someone I really look up to as a teacher, researcher, and person. She's a friend and I'm so excited she agreed to be on the podcast.

I'm always looking to talk with people, meet new teachers, and hear more about different pedagogies, writing practices, and what teaching looks like in different institutional contexts. So please, if you're interested in contributing to the podcast go to the website and fill out the contact form at pedagoguepodcast.com. Again, that's pedagoguepodcast.com.

Jessica Nastal is an associate professor and department chair at Prairie State College where her teaching in Composition I and II influences her research in writing assessment, work on accreditation, and participation in statewide placement reform efforts. Her article, "Beyond Tradition," was published as part of a special issue dedicated to Writing Assessment, Placement, and the Two-Year College in the *Journal of Writing Assessment*. Jessica serves as Developmental Editor for the *Journal of Writing Analytics*.

In this episode, we talk about teaching at a two-year college, how her institutional context has shaped her values as a teacher, we talk about retention rates and her research on writing placement.

Jessica, thanks for joining us.

SW: How about we start with your institutional context—teaching at Prairie State College, a community college in the south suburbs of Chicago. Do you mind sharing a little bit about your institutional context and your students?

JN: Shane, I am delighted to talk about this and I'm so excited that you've asked me. So this goes into why I am a teacher. So, I pursued my PhD to teach at a community college and the classes I'm teaching are English 101 and 102, so, Comp I and II—and that was on purpose. I wanted to get to know the field of rhetoric and composition through my PhD and then be able to put what I had learned into practice. I am just delighted to be able to do it. Prairie State College is a predominantly Black institution and an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution. So we're about 55% Black, and then about 20% Hispanic/Latinx, and 20% White. Most of our students are also middle-class. Two thirds of the students are Pell eligible. We also have a lot of early college

initiative students as well as returning adults, so I love the diversity. The Illinois Community College Board says that we have the most geographically, socioeconomically and racially diverse districts.

SW: Can you talk about how this influences your teaching or what it does to your teaching perhaps even the resources and materials that you use in the classroom?

JN: This semester I'm teaching three classes and I have reassigned time for, I'm department chair this year and then I have an overload for a special project I'm doing on student success. So, our contract for full time faculty is five courses a semester for full time load. And then, if you teach two composition classes then that load gets reduced to four. The online classes are capped at 24 and then the English Composition I and II those are capped at 22, developmental English classes are capped at 18. So, how all of this affects how I teach writing or my approach is basically I just want to have fun with my students and I am trying to implement a little bit of a writing about writing approach but I'm not totally there.

I like the idea of using this class as an introduction to writing studies. And the reason I like it is because it's the best way for me to be able to structure for students a space where I can help them understand how we can use our individual experiences and beliefs to inform whatever kind of work we do and whatever connections we're making with other people. Personally, one of my approaches also is that connection with my students. So, I grew up on the South side of Chicago and moved to the suburbs. I grew up in a working-class family. Most of my family before my generation did not go to college. I can relate to some of the concerns that my students have and I think the thing that they find most fun is that I hated composition as an undergraduate. So, using the experiences that I had growing up and struggles I've had with writing. And then the realization I had that writing can be something, writing is something that does something. It can be a force for positive action. And then helping my students understand that it's a real privilege.

This semester I blew everything up. The past couple of years I had a lot of reassigned time for work in assessment and accreditation and I was still doing the work that I loved but over the summer I had more space to think about how I want to redesign the classes. So, in the past I had focused a lot on response to student writing. So, students in both Comp I and Comp II would, we'd have some shared readings on controversies in the field of writing assessment in particular which is my background. So things like automated writing evaluation, whether to use rubrics, and language policies. And that was really fun and students found a lot of entries to the discussion. But I just, we're teaching. I always want to challenge myself to do something new and to learn more and apply what I'm learning from colleagues into the classroom.

So, this year I am teaching a contextualized English 101 class where I'm trying to bring in some principles of professional and technical writing into our English 101, which uses the WPA outcome statement and the framework for success and post-secondary writing is the foundation. And then in English 102 where our Comp II research class, the research parameters I'm using are the submission guidelines for Queen City Writers. And so, the goal is that some students would continue working on their projects for publication.

As a result of that requirement the Queen City Writer's submissions really focuses on cutting edge innovative stuff, writing that takes risks. And so, I was then challenged to bring in some of the most recent and most exciting scholarship in our field. Some of the things that we're reading this semester are some of Asia Martinez's work, some scholarship from the *Journal of Young Scholars in Writing* and Queen City Writers. It's a challenge for me because I don't really know what I think about some of the stuff like articles from spring 2019. I haven't had a lot of time to think about them but I'm excited to hear what other people are thinking. And so, this makes the class dynamic for me and I think it helps my students because they see my passion for the field and my respect for them and treating them like scholars.

SW: So, this is really fascinating. It sounds like your composition classroom takes a different shape than perhaps other first-year writing classrooms. It almost sounds like your classroom functions more like an introduction to writing and rhetoric and an introduction to composition studies and perhaps theory maybe more like a seminar class.

JN: So, one thing that students do comment on is that they appreciate this I guess the scaffolding but it's not just that. It's really like a seminar. So in my syllabus for the Composition II classes this semester I told them that it will function as a research seminar in rhetoric and composition/writing studies. Even with English 101 there's different modules or different units and everything is related. When I've been doing the response to student writing it was all connected to the same theme. And so, students were able to see how the ideas built on each other within the units and then across the semester or across the session. And in the middle of it they hated it because it felt redundant especially for people who are not interested in pursuing this field that I just discovered as a graduate student. But by the end it overwhelmingly, unprompted too, students will say how they started to see how things fit together and they appreciated that structure. And the reason I do it like that is because I think that it provides students with a lot of structure and foundation but I've seen their writing grow tremendously.

I guess the other reason that I said that I chose response to student writing because this is where my research is and that's true but it's because of the experiences that I've had as a student and that my students have had. We can all think of some of the best feedback we've ever had and how it made us feel and some of the worst feedback we've had and how that made us feel. And I'm trying to encourage students to think critically about that and about their role in their education and how they can change things. And that doesn't have to be within the field of education or writing studies, but they can be more of an active participant in their own education.

If they don't like the way someone makes them feel, they can have a productive conversation about that or they can think about why they felt badly. So, this is why I also think it's such a privilege because it's like in what other space could I try to suggest a way that I think maybe could help them have a better life. That's presumptuous almost of me to think that way but I don't know. It's something I really am struggling with.

SW: I'm really interested in your path to teaching and how you came to be where you are. You graduated with your PhD from UW Milwaukee and then you taught at a public research university in the deep south before moving to Prairie State, a two-year college in the south suburbs of Chicago. I think I'm interested in this because of how each institutional context seems

so different geographically but also in student population and what that does and means for teaching. How has your teaching changed? Have your values as a teacher changed?

JN: Thanks for asking about this and focusing in on values. So, I have a bachelor's and master's degree from Jesuit institutions and I identify as a recovering Catholic. So, but I love the education I received especially at Loyola for my undergrad and I really believe strongly in their mission of educating the whole person. And that was reaffirmed in my PhD program by my advisors who encouraged me to be a whole person in the classroom. My values certainly haven't changed and my teaching hasn't which my experience at the university was, it was great. I learned a lot but it was not a good fit for me and this is. So there, I had a really great opportunity to work with students who are majors in writing so that was just, that was wild. It was so fun. I got to have such great conversations with my students. I was able to teach an introduction to writing studies class, a writing pedagogy class, a writing for publication class. It was really exciting. I had never envisioned that for myself.

Coming here, it's home so there's that. But I think that my students, they trust me. Maybe not at first because I don't look like most of my students. They know I'm here because I want to be here and I don't know, there's the Midwestern way of living. Here I guess I feel a little bit more like I can understand my students more easily so then I'm able to push them differently because I'm more comfortable. Our overall institutional retention rate is about average. It's about 50% for full time students and just under 40% for part time students. So that's on par with our comparison group which is also terrible.

But our transfer rate is great. Our transfer out rate is like 40%. We have some very clearly defined articulation agreements with some of the area universities both in Illinois and northwest Indiana. We're really close to northwest Indiana. And our transfer advisor does excellent work but our graduation rate is only 10%. So, this is part of our institutional strategic plan. Part of every plan is trying to figure out how can we get more students to graduation. Of course, this is I think every two-year college's struggle. Patrick Sullivan has written about what success means at a community college. We know that students aren't here necessarily to get an associates. They're taking some classes, maybe coming part-time which means one class a semester for many, many years because they're working full time or working three jobs but the institution certainly wants to try to improve their retention, persistence, and success rates.

SW: I would like to take some time to talk about writing placement and I think given your institutional context what writing placement is and does at the community college level. I would encourage everyone to read "Beyond Tradition," a phenomenal article you wrote for the special issue in the Journal of Writing Assessment. Do you mind talking about writing placement at Prairie State College and what you've been thinking about here recently in terms of writing placement?

JN: So, we have recently redesigned our placement practice and what we are currently doing is, and we had to because we had been using Compass and then ACT phased Compass out. So we had been using Compass reading scores combined with a typical argumentative prompt that was designed and read by English instructors at Prairie State College. What we are doing now is students are reading one of a couple articles that our literacy expert has vetted and then they're

asked to annotate it, write a short summary of it, and then write an essay. And then the readers give students a placement like 98, 99, or 101 for each of the three areas. And I think it's if they get two out of three in a 101 placement then they're placed in a 101 but if their essay placement is 101 then that trumps the other, the annotation score or the summary score, because we realized that especially for annotations for strong students they might skip that step.

So that's how our placement system is working. But at the state level we have our Illinois Community College Board has implemented a set of recommendations for placement that they're calling multiple measures but it's really multiple single measures. So, if a student brings in any of this list of options they can enroll directly into the English 101 class. The methods include an SAT score, ACT score, a GED score, and then a high school GPA of 3.0 or higher in general and then the recommendations are different for math. If a student has any one of those things, then they don't have to take the placement test.

And so, right now we're conducting some studies to determine how that's going to affect our enrollment and we're wondering if we might instead actually follow what Mya Poe, Norbert Elliot, and I wrote about in the "Roadmap." If this is the way the state is heading there was also legislation that was proposed to reform placement and developmental education with an eye toward significantly decreasing developmental education. So it's like if this is already where the state is headed this might be a good opportunity for us to eliminate placement and do that dramatic re-envisioning of what kinds of opportunity structures and support we can provide for students and faculty.

SW: Writing placement can take a lot of different forms and there's a lot of different conversations around placement. You just mentioned one part of the conversation: should we eliminate placement all together? That seems like an ongoing conversation and it's nothing new. Questions like, "What writing placement model should we use? Should these models be formed locally? How do we create models that complement local values? What do we do about state testing and placement? Should placement be self-directed?" There's a lot of questions and now is a really good time to talk about writing placement perhaps given our social and political climate and our educational policies and structures. So I'd like to end with this question. Do you mind talking about your research and your thoughts and feelings on writing assessment and writing placement?

JN: So, I really feel very unsettled about writing placement, I always have. And the study in "Beyond Tradition" I guess crystallized it for me. So, some of the results that stood out were the correlations between the grade that a student earned in one of the composition classes and their overall GPA. Those correlations rose throughout the sequence. So, they were lower in the lowest level developmental English class, they rose in the mid-level class, and then they reached high positive correlation in composition one. So, it looks like the correlations between a student's grade in the composition class and their GPA overall that those increased. So, it seems like we did a pretty good job placing students where they needed to be. But as that happened the group of students became more homogenous, it became more White. When we saw this information, it confirmed some of the research that's been done nationwide and it really troubled our institution, our faculty and administrators, and the staff who work in the placement testing office.

We saw things like big gaps, like big moments of loss in between the students who started the lowest level developmental class and passed it. There was a big gap between those who passed that lowest level class and even started the next one and then a big loss within the college level English 101 class. So for instance, our Hispanic/Latinx population did really well in passing the lowest level class three quarters, 76% did. But then there was a 40% loss of the students who succeeded they did not continue to the next class in the sequence. And then, by the time the group of Hispanic/Latinx students who started 98, the lowest level class and then went to the college level only 56% passed that English 101 compared to 82% of our White students.

So, for our Black students as a predominantly Black institution, our Black students were overrepresented in the sample in the developmental classes. The lowest level developmental class was 80% Black or African American and 91% of those students who started that class did not pass English 101. As a department, my colleague Jason Evans has published on how the department has tried to reform our curriculum countless times. This is a department of teacher scholars who are really committed to our student body to working at a community college. We believe in the mission of access to education. And so, we're always trying to revise the placement method, our curriculum, I guess the entire composition sequence. To then find these results it was horrifying.

So, this is why I feel conflicted about placement because I do believe that we need to radically reenvision it. You had asked earlier about some of the resources that I draw on and Norbert Elliot's work here, Mya Poe, Christie Toth, they have certainly influenced my ideas. Rich Haswell and Norbert Elliot wrote an article about innovation. I think that we radically need to reimagine what we're doing but I'm also really hesitant or I guess nervous because two main reasons. One is that access to education. If we eliminate placement or try to ensure ... I mean I guess the movement right now is to ensure that as many people as possible experience the college level class as soon as possible within the first semester or the first year. And so, some states and some institutions have gone to eliminate placement or enroll everyone in the English 101 or are doing a lot of the ALP models so like co-requisite 99 or 101.

But I think our fear is are we advancing access to education and opportunity to learn or are we restricting that access. At our institution at Prairie State College, we have been canceling that lowest level developmental English class. Very few students place into it and so in the spring for instance we canceled it. But what if there's so few students who are placing into it or who are enrolling in it for the fall? We were wondering even if it were under the minimum student threshold should we still offer it because if we don't, where do those students go? If they go over to adult basic ed which offers free non-credit classes how do they then come back over to the credit side? And if the community college is supposed to be, it's supposed to be for everybody then is this going to change our mission? Are we going to change who we're including and excluding? And so, I don't know I'm really torn.

SW: Thank you so much Jessica. Those are some really good questions to ask and conversations to have in our institutional context about writing placement and what writing placement is and does. Thank you for spending some time talking with us.

JN: Thank you for doing these interviews and for your thoughtfulness.