

Episode 159: Jessica Nichole Begay

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

Pedagogue launched in 2019 with the goal of amplifying perspectives and experiences on teaching writing across institutions. For the most part, I feel like the podcast has promoted a wide range of perspectives across post-secondary education contexts. Starting out, my hope was for Pedagogue to be a platform that fills gaps in more traditional alphabetic scholarship, which often privileges teachers situated in more research-intensive universities that have space and time to publish. I wanted the podcast to be a space that embraces and showcases experiences and knowledges from all types of classrooms, for us to consider and think about what teaching writing looks like, what it means to teach writing in different contexts, from two-year colleges to Historically Black Colleges and Universities, to Hispanic-Serving Institutions, to private colleges, to small liberal arts colleges, to large and small public universities.

Through all these episodes, there's still something missing. The voices and perspectives of teachers at Tribal Colleges and Universities. I taught basic writing and first year composition at a Tribal College as an adjunct for almost two years, and those students and classrooms impacted my perception and understanding of teaching more than any other context. There are currently 32 fully accredited Tribal Colleges and Universities in the United States, serving approximately 30,000 full-time and part-time students according to the US Department of Education. This is the tenth episode in a 10-week series that highlights tribal colleges and universities.

In this episode, Jessica Nichole Begay talks about building a future in rhetoric and composition where tribal colleges and universities are recognized, supported, and celebrated. The American Indian Resource Center at the University of Utah and indigenous centered first year writing curriculum.

Jessica Nichole Begay is a dine woman from the Navajo Nation, currently a graduate student at the University of Utah in the writing and rhetoric studies department. In addition to pursuing her degree, she is creative at heart. She enjoys creating art, whether it is on a canvas or on paper through words or through the motion she creates with her hands. Writing gives her the power to share her story, and stories of her ancestors and people who came before her. She strives to pursue what is on her mind and what means the most in her heart.

Jessica, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: This episode is a little different from the previous ones in the series. You don't teach at a tribal college. You're from the Navajo Nation and you center indigenous histories, knowledges, and practices as a teacher and researcher in your institutional context. And I felt like this was an important way to end this series so that all of us can contemplate the ways in which our own writing classes can be informed by indigenous knowledges and practices. This series started in part because of how little tribal college perspectives and voices are included in rhetoric and composition scholarship in the forms of publishing, national conferences, a lack of

representation, a lack of information and understanding, and a lack of amplification and advocacy of tribal college voices. I rarely, if ever, hear from students and teachers in tribal colleges, and this is something I realized whenever I was teaching in a tribal college seven years ago.

I'm going to start this conversation with a big question, but first I just wanted to acknowledge where the question's coming from and, hopefully, this provides some context for the rest of our discussion. How do we, particularly those outside tribal colleges and universities teaching in different institutional contexts like HBCUs or two-year colleges or HSIs or private universities or public universities, build a future where tribal colleges are recognized, supported, celebrated, partnered with, and ultimately centered in composition and rhetoric?

JNB: My home is actually back in New Mexico, if you know it, Gallup in Crownpoint, New Mexico. That is originally where I'm from. A very small and rural community. So it took some time getting used to the city life, and I think that's honestly where I started to begin to think back to my communities back home, the institutions, the places where individuals go to receive higher education. And when I was first discovering higher education, where to go and where to continue my education from high school, I considered possibly going to tribal colleges in the beginning. I was often told about Haskell University, I was told about Thanet College. I was told about Fort Lewis, different places where American Indians receive tuition paid and access to higher education utilizing their culture, their traditions, and their ways and perspectives. And to me, that felt really inviting, especially being from the community, from the Native American community. And I considered going to institutions like such.

However, I started to get into the mindset that maybe those institutions wouldn't set me up to where I would like to be for my career. And it took me some time. It took me finishing my entire degree at the University of Utah to realize that that is not true at all. Anyone who has access to those colleges definitely should go to there. I really value that. A lot of the tribal colleges are rooted. The curriculum is rooted in the teachings and the knowledge of our native people. And now that I'm at the University of Utah, it almost as is I'm looking for that. I'm searching for that everywhere about what curriculum, what textbooks could be written by indigenous authors, different articles that are written by indigenous people. I felt like throughout my time through college, I was searching for anything related to my culture, and unfortunately, University of Utah is known to be majority white population.

During that time as I was completing my degree, I didn't have access to art resources even to learn more about indigenous rhetorics, indigenous peoples, indigenous scholars, even indigenous writers. It took me some time to realize that there are people, people like me who look exactly like me who have been doing work, really amazing work for a very long time, dedicating their life to ensure that our voices are heard as native people, especially the knowledge that we hold. I believe that native people are knowledge holders, whether it is culturally, whether it's sacred knowledge, whether it's based in Western ideologies, I do think that our native scholars are absolutely incredible at what they do and what they teach to other individuals. But it just always felt like my time, I just always wanted to find some connection to my community, to my people, and which is why I am grateful to even be in a position to be creating a curriculum based on American Indian students in mind and based on the community where I come from.

SW: You developed the American Indian Resource Center writing and rhetoric studies fellow position when you were an undergraduate at the University of Utah, which is a predominantly white institution. Can you talk more about that resource center and position?

JNB: Yeah. Absolutely. I'll begin at the beginning. Like I said, I was searching for materials, resources based on indigenous knowledge, indigenous people, and I came upon one of a professor who took me up under her wing, and I am more than grateful for her knowledge that she shared with me. She actually spent some time in Crown Point teaching at Thanet College. Her name is Dr. Christie Toth, and she works at the University of Utah as well. But under her direction, we created this fellowship together and she invited me to step into spaces, particularly with other American Indian students in mind, and that's at the American Indian Resource Center here on campus. But the fellowship really was to get writing tutoring to the American Indian community on campus because we talked about how there's an anxiety that builds up when you don't see someone that looks exactly like you or you don't see someone who may come from the same background, come from the same community that you grew up in.

And it's really daunting to step into a space where you don't see people like you. You don't see professors, tutors who may share the same values, same teachings that you grew up with. And I told her that I would love to be an individual to invite that back into spaces and be a writing tutor to help other students. And I think through that, it really did help some students particularly receive that help, receive those resources. Because a lot of the times through my work, they would always tell me, I just never felt comfortable stepping into a space that a lot of those individuals mainly were white. And a lot of the times those American Indian students didn't feel comfortable stepping into those spaces. So bringing the resource to the students meeting them where they were was really important to me. And through that position, I was able to not only help people on their writing assignments, on their scholarship essays, whatever it may have been, but I invited each of those students to not be afraid of telling their story, don't be afraid of being who they authentically are.

A lot of the times I feel like you don't hear that in higher education. I feel like it almost strips you of your knowledge as indigenous people, as people of color. Me and my students often talk about how it almost feels like we're living in two worlds where you have to build yourself up to get through this world where your values aren't truly valued. Your teachings of your people that you grew up with aren't valued and just you as an individual is not valued in those higher education spaces. And a lot of the times those students would walk away feeling not only just appreciative of the help, but they would walk away feeling that there is someone who looks exactly like them, who is working at this institution and who wants them to succeed through college. So I think that this position, and it was the first time it has ever been done at the University of Utah. I don't believe that having a writing tutor housed at the American Indian Resource Center has ever happened before.

It was a great honor to be working with each of those students and to help get people to come to the American Indian Resource Center because that's one of the reasons why we created it to let other students know that this is a resource on campus, it is open to you. It is open to all students to come and see. It's not just meant for the Native American community, it is for anyone to come

and I guess joining the community if they would like. When I first started at the university, I told Christie that I had no clue that the American Indian Resource Center was even stationed on campus and I felt really lost. I felt like I had no community there. In some ways, I felt like the invisible one. I didn't feel like there was a space for me on campus, and that sense of belonging diminished really quickly.

So I think through the position, it also helps students know that there is a space for you on campus and that people are looking out for you. We want you to succeed. And I think that this position can and should be carried on into the next couple of years because I have seen such amazing students grow from not only my help, but from Christie's help as well. And of course from the American Indian Resource Center staff as well.

SW: Jessica, you're developing and teaching an indigenous-centered version of a first-year writing sequence at the University of Utah that will be offered at the AIRC. Can you talk more about that curriculum and what you hope to see happen?

JNB: Well taken from the experiences that I've had being a writing tutor, I had the opportunity to work with some students from, excuse me, my own community. And there was one student in particular who brought a paper to me and he wanted to write about the living in two worlds about how being assimilated in boarding schools. He wanted to relate his own experience to attending the University of Utah to that experience. And when I first read the paper, I completely understood what the student wanted to say. I knew what he wanted to communicate. But he came to me because one of his professors told him, particularly for his writing class, first year writing, told him that he didn't want him to write about those such experiences. He told him that he didn't really want him to focus on that in his paper. And to me, I did not like that because I believe that writing is one way to share your story, whether that is, I guess acceptable or not. I do think that writing is one way to fully communicate who you are through your own lens and through your own perspective.

And taking from that experience I thought about the curriculum that I wanted to teach. I wanted to invite all students to be who they are authentically, whether that's grounded in their cultural ways, whether that's them grounded in their teachings, their perspectives of how they grew up. I just wanted to invite students into these spaces, into these higher education spaces to be who they are once you come into this classroom. I'm not expecting you to be someone else. I'm not expecting you to almost balance living in these two different worlds. I just want the student to be authentically themselves. So after thinking about all of that, I decided to create a curriculum based on American Indian knowledge, American Indian ways of teaching, and I look to a lot of the scholars who are doing the work today. One in particular is Amanda Tachine, Dr. Amanda Tachine, and she is absolutely incredible of what she does. She actually dedicated her life during COVID to write a book based on Native Presence and Sovereignty in College, and that's the title of the name. It is also about sustaining indigenous weapons to defeat systemic monsters. So taking from her teachings from that book, I decided to create a curriculum where I wanted to talk about these systemic monsters. I wanted to talk about these real life monsters that haunt us almost as indigenous people, thinking about how we're going to fail, thinking about the different ways that we're not enough or the financial instabilities that we all have to go through, the hardships, the many hardships that native students go through on the daily. And I wish I had

more than one professor that knew about my background, that knew about my community, or even just had knowledge about Native American people. I feel like a lot of times we are often told that, native people are still around, native people are still living.

And it's almost daunting to me because these people come from higher education institutions, and I am thinking, how do you not know that native people are still here? We have always been here and we will remain here. And I think that's why this curriculum is so important because not only is it just a pilot course just to finally help students in American Indian communities, but it's also a course for professors to take from. I don't expect professors just to put in a reading into their syllabus or to teach just one lesson based on indigenous knowledge. I mean truly taking it upon themselves to learn more about our people, about where we come from. But those individuals, the students who do come from those communities, I did want to create a class where it celebrates them, where it lets them know that their knowledge is valued, whether it's culturally or sacred. I wanted to ensure that their ways of understanding, their ways of communicating is valued as well.

One in particular, one of the projects that I'm going to assign students is to write a final paper based on bought descent object. And the object can be anything from a jewelry piece that you've been given, a ribbon skirt. I also considered asking students to think about a dance. I thought that is one way of telling a story just through the movement of our body. I think that it is one way to invite people to think about their own culture and what excites them, because a lot of these individuals continue to dance in powwows or they continue to wear their ribbon skirts with pride, same thing with their jewelry. And I feel like those are stories waiting to be told to other individuals, not from our community. So this project is really more about how to, I guess, explain the reasoning, the importance, and the history of each selected piece, including the designs and the colors fused together, because a lot of our native stories begins that way. We talk about one thing, but we also talk about the importance, the history, even based on the colors. There was one in particular, one student's presentation that I got to see, not a student in my course, but she's a great friend. But she talked about how ribbon skirts has been around for a very long time and how each different ribbon represents something. And just her talking about it, her sharing her story about her grandma, teaching her how to sew with her hands and that is one way of communicating, is teaching and listening. And I thought that that would be a great way for students to reconnect with their culture, their community, because each design, each color does represent something. Another one of the projects assignments that I considered asking the students is called the garden report.

And during that time, I'm going to invite the students to visit our campus gardens, and it is in partnership with the sustainability office on campus. But those students are going to volunteer in the gardens, and they're going to select whether it is a plant or animal, inhabitin, an object, a story, or historical text. The students can write about anything related to that. I thought that it would be a great time for students not only to learn more about our land here in Utah, but learn how to care for our land and almost return back to our old ways of caring and supporting and tending to our relatives that inhabit these lands. But I also thought it was a great time to introduce, talking about food sovereignty, land rights, water rights, the lack of clean and running water on the reservation, and how that affects our ability to even farm on our own lands.

I consider having the students talk about treaty violations, the history of indigenous groups protesting for the protection of our lands, of our natural resources, and the amazing activists who continue to do that work today, as well as the history of mining and natural resources and the health risks and the health disparities that occur on our reservations that we all grew up with. We have all seen it. We have all maybe been personally affected by it, whether that is the death of a family member due to cancer or even just acknowledging someone in the community member that has been affected by those unjust ways of mining and uranium mining specifically. But also what does the land tell? What story does the land tell? Whether that is the changing of the seasons, the constellations in space, animals and insects.

I want to invite the students to think about those things because there is so much to learn from indigenous people, especially the stories that come from it. And I think through this curriculum, it almost invites those students to think back to their own ways, their own ways of being indigenous people. It invites them to ensure that their role on campus and caring for this land is valued as well, because I feel like in higher education, we don't really talk about these different ways that we can live more sustainability or take care of our natural resources. So I thought that was one way to bring that perspective back into higher education first year of writing.

SW: Jessica, say you have a colleague who is teaching a first-year writing class at a predominantly white institution or some other institutional context where there's very little indigenous representation, and this colleague is interested in what you're doing with indigenous meaning-making sovereignty, centering indigenous practices in your own first-year writing sequence. This person wants to know more. They want to know more about the curriculum and maybe how they can even adapt it given their own institutional context, how they can bring in similar values in their first-year writing class, but they don't really know where to start. How would you consult or mentor someone or advise someone who is in this position?

JNB: These past few weeks I've been at orientation for new teaching and being a new graduate student at the University of Utah. So during that time, I did get the opportunity to share with other professors, other teachers about my course and the development of it, and especially the curriculum. And a lot of the times I get asked, "How can I add this to my course? Is there a reading that I can add to my syllabus? Is there a reading that you would recommend for my students to read for this first year writing course?" And personally, I do give them the reading not only just for their students to enjoy, but also for the professor themselves to learn more about. I truly do not know how to, I guess, invite more professors to teach based on indigenous knowledge. I do think that this is a very unique position because I myself is an indigenous person, so I do have that understanding. I do have the awareness that indigenous people share specifically about our culture and our knowledge that we are holders of, whether it's sacred or culturally.

So I do think that I would be very careful. I am very careful about how I invite professors to add their indigenous ways to the curriculum. But I first invite those professors who do ask to learn about our community, to learn about our people, and to learn more about what American Indian students need, especially from professors. I feel like there's a lack in knowing what American Indian students how they read and write, what do we lack in, what do we triumph in? I feel like there is not enough exposure that is talked about that enough. So I feel like just even that being

talked about, that being thought about, especially in those communities, those fields, I think that is more than enough. But I guess teaching about the land, I feel like you have to be someone who already knows the way with the land, who understands that this, our Mother Earth deserves to be protected. It is very sacred to us.

It should be cared for. We were always taught, especially when we were younger, that you should not take from the land. You should not take away from her. You shouldn't destroy her. You should only add to her. You should only care for her. So I feel like if you don't have that background, if you don't have that knowledge and caring for the land, it may be a little bit more difficult to teach that assignment. But I do know that there are a lot of people who do care about the climate, who care about the increasingly global warming that is happening every single day. So I do know how that this can be utilized, especially with the readings that I have chosen for this specific garden report. But I would just be very mindful, be very careful about the way that you portray a lot of these assignments if you do decide to utilize this for your curriculum. Like I said, I grew up having the knowledge about the land, about my culture, about the ways that our elders thought about a lot of these things as well.

SW: It's important to reemphasize that this intentional centering of indigenous meaning making and knowledge doesn't happen by adding a reading or two to a syllabus. I'm thinking about the deep cultural awareness, understanding, listening that needs to take place for an outsider to really design curriculum for 16 weeks. I'm thinking of that person who's genuine and curious and really wants to take this work up and really the labor and time that it would acquire.

JNB: No. It absolutely makes sense. So for the 16 weeks, I did have to find a lot of readings. I did a lot of digging about the many American Indian scholars who are continuing to do the work as well as other people of color scholars who are continuously, who are hard at work at trying to deliver this knowledge to other professors, other conferences, other entities, institutions. And from that research, I was then able to create those 16 weeks of curriculum. But I personally, I do not know how to explain it fully, but I just took from my own experience. I took from my own experience as an American Indian student. Like I mentioned before, I attended an institution that was mainly just white people. And from there, I felt really marginalized. I didn't feel like I had a place in the institute at all. So I took mainly from my own experiences, but I took a lot from other experiences as well, from the research that I read and that I gained from.

And I think one way of knowing is just by reading the research that has come out so far from these indigenous authors. One in particular is the Amanda Tachine book. She talks a lot about the experiences about 10 American Indian students who have gone off to college and how their hardships, what they have faced daily, has shaped them to be who they truly are today. So I definitely think if you would like to take this on, especially after knowing a lot about the history, the background of American Indian people, I think the best way to do so is just to read the experiences, the true lived experiences of American Indian students and learn from them. And think of ways, ponder about ways that you could help those students about whether it is to learn how to communicate better, write better, read better. I feel like there's not an emphasis on reading as well, because I feel like reading is one step to learn more about writing, and a lot of the professors skip over that fact.

And I feel like some professors expect you to come into their classrooms with already this knowing and understanding of how to read and how to write academic texts. And a lot of the times, that's not the best way to set up your course. I do believe that thinking about other experiences of students, real lived circumstances that they are truly facing every single day. Consider those in your curriculum. Meet students where they are. And as you're building that curriculum, ask questions, ask the scholars who are doing the work today. I think about Lloyd Lee who's at the Thanet College right now, and all the work that he does to try to get the Navajo culture ideologies based in his education, his curriculum out into the world. But like you mentioned before, a lot of the scholars, indigenous scholars, their work isn't valued enough. And I think that is one way if you would like to build your own 16-week curriculum, is to start there by listening and learning and asking questions about the work that has already been published by these amazing authors and writers and scholars who have done the hard work by getting themselves through school and by getting themselves the education. So I'm sure that they've had their own personal experiences as well and took from their own experiences too.

SW: This last question revisits the throughline throughout the series which has asked folks to think about what they wish people knew or understood about tribal colleges and universities, and you had a unique perspective of what tribal colleges and universities were or could do for you. I'm thinking about part of the story you shared earlier, and I wanted to give you space to expand on that story more. Coming from the Navajo Nation, you have a unique relationship and perspective as someone who chose to attend a predominantly white institution, but has since done really incredible work on and about indigenous practices and knowledges. I'm interested in hearing more of your own story. What influenced your perception of tribal colleges, why you chose to attend the University of Utah, and in what ways your own experiences have changed your perspective on tribal colleges and/or again, where we go from here as a field?

JNB: Right. No. Like I said, when I first thought about higher education, when I was a senior in high school, I did consider attending a tribal college. I was told, and I was given pamphlets about where to go. But initially what I had thought is that, that institution, that tribal college would not get me to where I wanted to be, career wise, educational wise, and it took me completely the entire time that I was in college to realize that that is not true. That a lot of the teachings are not valued because I feel like they are rooted in the knowledge and the perspectives from native people. And I think that is beautiful the way that a lot of those professors in tribal colleges have set up their courses, their curriculum. They themselves have taken it upon themselves to think about their community, their indigenous ways, their practices, and their culture in order to think about how to create a curriculum for specifically for American Indian students.

And at the beginning, I didn't see how I would've fit into that tribal college specifically, just because I had that understanding that it wouldn't get me to where I wanted to be until I graduated from the University of Utah. I thought about different ways that a lot of the times tribal colleges are pushed to the back, their research, their conferences that are held that often at these tribal colleges, you don't hear much about it in higher education, you don't hear a lot about the scholarship that comes from these institutions. I feel like it took me some time to finally get to do the digging to find a lot of the research that does come out of tribal colleges from the professors themselves and not seeing the work that these professors do, these perspectives, not seeing it

valued in the institution that I was attending. It really affected me. It didn't sit right with me that we weren't really valuing the scholarship, the perspectives that come out of tribal colleges. It really concerned me that a lot of the research wasn't even included in a lot of the conferences that I was attending. I feel like each time that I attend a conference or each time that I go into a space where we're talking about curriculum, I always expect to hear something about American Indian students. But unfortunately, I don't. I don't hear anything based around American Indian students or the way that American Indian students learn and grasp certain understandings, especially with what rhetoric is. I feel like a lot of times we say these big vocabulary words, yet when students are wanting to join the conversation, they don't want to join the conversation because of these lack of knowing of these words that are thrown around in higher ed.

But my perception quickly changed just because of the experiences that I went through. It almost, like I said before, it almost felt like you're living in two different worlds where you're trying to balance your own culture, you're trying to balance your own values as an indigenous person, but you're also taking up these western ideologies that in some way you're trying to hold onto your culture. But at the same time, it's almost as if it's being pushed to the back each time that you're learning something new. And the way that tribal colleges are created is that they're concerned with ensuring that they're valuing each student's culture, each student's perspective as an indigenous person. And I think that there's a lot to learn from tribal colleges because of the scholarship that comes from it. And the students that come out of that are still rooted in their culture.

They love and they adore where they come from, their communities, their native communities. And I think that's absolutely incredible because not only are they earning a degree in higher education, but they're also still thinking about their cultural ways as indigenous people. I think that institutions like the University of Utah have a lot to learn from tribal colleges like such.

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