

Episode 154: Jodi Burshia

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 fifth episode in a 10-week series that highlights tribal colleges and universities.

In this episode, Jodi Burshia talks about teaching at Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, analyzing text and claiming indigenous ancestry, drawing on lived experiences as meaning-making and knowledge-building, and what she wished people knew about Tribal Colleges and Universities.

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Jodi Burshia grew up on the Tohono O'Odham Reservation in southern Arizona. She attended the University of Arizona and earned a BA and MAED before moving to Albuquerque to be closer to her home community of the Laguna Pueblo to pursue doctoral studies. In 2021 she earned a doctoral degree from the University of New Mexico. She loves working in the classroom, and has been a classroom educator since 2000. As a professor, she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses on critical analysis of text in a multimedia.

Jodi, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You teach at Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute. Can you talk more about your institutional context?

JB: Yes. I teach with the Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, SIPI is short for that. And, my classes... Well, the classes range from English 99, I've taught those... I've taught all the classes available through English 219, which is technical writing. I currently teach English 102 now. And so, we have a lower enrollment. I think, at the beginning of the trimester, I had 11 students, and so now I have, let's see, four students total. And, who knows, they could pop back in, they could pop back up, and so we're just ready just in case. Because they're in the midst of... I think the majority of the students are between the ages of 18, 19, all the way through, I think my oldest student was maybe in her 60s? 50s or 60s. And I say that because she said that she was a secretary for 25 years. So, we have a pretty large range in terms of... Pretty large age range.

And then, the demographic, we definitely had a larger class demographic, maybe about 24 students, 24 to 30 students per trimester in the spring and fall. This is prior to COVID. Then, during COVID, it was just a little more interesting. And then now, post COVID, we definitely have a lower enrollment. So, just trying to work with those different factors. I had, let's see, prior to COVID, we had students from all over. And so, because they would state... They were from different parts of what we now know as the United States, different parts of... Well, there weren't any Canadian citizens that I can recall. Yet, during COVID, we might've had some Canadian citizens and people that were either north or south of the US border. After COVID, I think we have... it's primarily... they're, I think, all Diné students. That's who's there now.

SW: What are some values or ideas you want students to take from your classes?

JB: What really guides my writing is meeting the students where they are. I really want to... I want them to leave the classroom confident in their skills that they're gaining in the classroom. My hope is that they fall in love with reading, and looking at different types of texts, and being able to really go after different types of texts to really show their indigenous scholarship. Yet, so far, what I really want for them is to be able to... so, let me back up. Sometimes, that just doesn't happen. They just might not have a love for reading at that particular time, but they might later in life. And so, I definitely wanted to just meet them where they are, and to help them gain the skills that they need to be able to accomplish whatever they're going to do next, either if it is part of joining the workforce, or part of being a leader in their community, or just doing different things; and definitely having better English skills than they did previously. Because we're all in there learning. And so, if they require more and better English skills than they had prior, then that's the hope that I have for them.

I really want to collaborate with all of my colleagues, whether it be at the same institution over at SIPI or, recently, I was working with the American Indian College Fund, and they had a faculty gathering, and there was so many different faculty that were there, and it was great to be able to connect with them. Because, as we were sitting at these different tables, we were talking about, "Oh, well, we could do this, and we could do that," and so there were so many avenues for collaboration. So, it was just great. And so, even if what we're working toward doesn't get accomplished over at SIPI, I have a definite hope that it could happen at one of our different travel colleges. So, I think that that really guides the way that many of us are going about working with the students.

SW: What text and writing assignments do you use, and how do students respond?

JB: Well, I have a combination of... So, prior to COVID, the students would come in, and they would get different texts, different textbooks, or different types of reading material. Yet, during COVID, it was a little more challenging to do it that way. So, I really tried to find a lot of online resources. I wanted to... I wanted the students to look at articles and different types of texts that they could find and not have to worry about coming into the classroom to get textbooks or things of that sort. Well, on one hand, they weren't able to, and then the other hand was just that it was a definite challenge. And so, looking at what could be made available for the students is what changed that. And so, definitely trying to find some different resources that could be accessible for the students. They are working on a combination of... So, I have different essays that they need to do, so we start with a five paragraph essay. And, looking at the different nuts and bolts of that, it being really clear. And so, we were all starting with the fact that, yes, some people are going to be zipping through and creating a five paragraph essay like it was no problem. Others, they haven't been in the classroom in a while; they haven't done anything of that sort in a long while. So, working on a five paragraph essay started to be a little daunting. Yet, we were getting a chance to... And that's a great thing about having the small class size is that we were able to just really work on that. So, starting with a five paragraph, six paragraph, seven paragraph, and then ending the trimester with a 10 paragraph. So, all of these assignments are not extremely lengthy. They're definitely doable.

So, it really has come down to having the students break down information. How are they going to access the information? How are they going to critically analyze different types of texts and figure out these different connections between writing the actual essays? And, I also have them work on annotated bibliographies. And, they're not super long annotated bibliographies, but I want them to be aware of, "This is what is needed in terms of citing," so they can pull together both primary and secondary sources and pull together these different parts of relevant information so they can see all those different connections. And so, yeah, throughout the trimester, we just work together to make sure that all of this can happen.

So, they pull in a lot of pop culture references, which is great, because there's so many different ways that they are seeing pop culture. And then, being able to actually connect that to different points of what we're reading... So say for example, looking at different short stories, looking at different poems and saying, "Oh, I can see this here. This is what the writer was saying about this," has been really interesting to see the ways that they're making those mental leaps, really, to make those mental leaps and to critically analyze things. I want the students who have to have access to whomever people that identify. And so, one of the articles that we look at is, "Who claims you back?" And so, looking at that, I mean, people, if they claim indigenous ancestry, excuse me, what does that mean? What does that mean if people... If the writer's claiming that, yet the community members aren't claiming them back, what does that mean for the information that that they're working on? And so, it's a really interesting, I guess, combination of just pulling together different types of writing, different types of writers, and pretty much critically analyzing all of it.

They're super intense and just really, really interesting conversations. So, people have talked about the fact that, "Well, they're just a paper Indian," so technically they have a CIB, but then

others... But, what does that mean if they were pulled out of the community? So, say they were adopted out, or they just weren't raised in the community; we've had some really intense conversations about that. And they've been... You know, I have to remind them at different times to, "Remember to cite this, remember to pull this into your own essay," because people get caught up in wanting to talk about things, and it's been great.

SW: Jodi, what are some challenges to teaching writing at Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute?

JB: I think... Oh, boy, that is such a great question. So, really just talking about what they think might not be obvious based upon their own understanding of like, "Okay, so I'm in this classroom. I am in a college setting. So, this would be considered knowledge, or this would not be considered knowledge." And what I'm talking about is, so, students say, for example, people have a large... They have so much knowledge about sheep herding, for example, or about sheep herding and, say, chopping wood, all of those different things, and so they're like, "Oh, that wouldn't be considered something that would be considered knowledge within this western style classroom." So, it's just reminding the student that it is; that's important information that not everybody else has. And so, that's been a really interesting part of it.

In trying to meet the students where they are, trying to figure out what might be considered helpful to them has really bridged that. It's really helped thinking about trying to have them acknowledge that that is knowledge, that it's not something... That it should be considered by the western frame of thought as knowledge, too. And I think there's that piece of information that just might not be common amongst... I don't know where that necessarily stems from, if it's an issue of, "This hasn't been considered knowledge in a K through 12 setting." So, when they get to college, we want for people to talk about that in terms of knowledge, but it's not necessarily seen as knowledge in those different settings. So it's... Some parts of that can be a challenge. And I think that's one of those things that definitely follows students and educators along with their entire path.

SW: What do you enjoy the most about teaching writing at your institutional context?

JB: You know, I want students to know that their words are valuable. I want them to see that as something that not only holds value for that particular time and space that we're in, in terms of being in the classroom setting, but then for their own future knowledge, for their own community knowledge, to see themselves as scholars. I want them to have that deep realization. And sometimes that happens while they're in my classes, but then sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it happens when they're a little older, they have maybe some more life experience, or whatever the case is. And so, that's what I enjoy most about working with the students, is definitely seeing them find that hidden potential that they might not have seen previously.

I think trying to give them feedback so that they can see, and that's such a very small piece of it, just sort of like, "Oh, this is good. You're on the right path of thinking about things and pulling different parts of information apart," so they can see those definite connections, that's where I like to give feedback. Yet, there's that different idea of what's considered western knowledge, or what's considered knowledge in a western sense versus indigenous knowledge, and so, in many

times, the students want to keep it separate because it's not... Or, they're not thinking that it's considered knowledge, but when it really is. And, the best way that I can do that, to help them, is by giving feedback and saying, "This is, you're on the right track." I think giving encouraging and positive feedback, but also encouraging them to be clear, has been really helpful. Because sometimes, that's not always the case. I want it to be, but sometimes it just isn't. People just aren't as clear as I would hope they would be.

SW: Jodi, this is my last question. What do you wish people knew or understood about Tribal Colleges and Universities?

JB: I really wish that people knew about... I wish they knew about tribal colleges. I wish they knew that they were even there. And I think, some of the time... There's one student recently sharing about how he had earned 90 credits at SIPI, and then he was able to transfer those credits over to a major university, which is huge. And so, my hope is that more students would be able to see that possibility there, that they would even know. If I had known that a tribal college was even a possibility when I was needing to take 101 and 102, I think that would really have helped, especially in terms of knowing that I could get those gen eds out of the way, and that there was a connection to the community. That would've certainly helped. And, it would've definitely changed what I had learned and experienced during my first couple years of college. And so, I think that's my hope, is that more people would know that tribal colleges are actually there. And then, about what they could actually do.

There's so many more communities that need tribal colleges to happen to their communities, so that college doesn't seem like it's so far out of the way, that it's more of an attainable thing that the people can actually have. I think it definitely provides, perhaps... I don't want to say a clearer route, but I think, in many cases, it can. It definitely wouldn't create as much debt or heartbreak as going to a four-year university straight off, especially if you're going straight from high school to a college setting, and then taking colleges right away. I think it would definitely help people build more confidence in being able, "Okay, so I can be a better writer by doing this, or I could be better at math by taking these classes, by having this experience." And I think that, when more and more students and community members and then educators can see this as like, "Oh, this is something that is important about their experience," I think that would certainly change.

Connecting more with the community, so the community see it as something that is beneficial; many tribal communities have seen this as something that their community members need. So, they started these tribal colleges, really, out of their own communities, where they're really based upon language and culture. And that's something that four-year universities definitely don't have, and they strive to bring in people that have those qualities; yet, it's not always there. And I think, definitely, communicating it in that way, talking about this is something that tribal colleges definitely have that four-year universities don't at this point... And, it's not a dig at four-year universities, because they're working hard in many other routes, but they don't have that. It's not a naturally occurring presence that is definitely there. And so, they have to work hard to gain culture and knowledge when it's already there with tribal colleges.

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