

Episode 30: Jody Shipka

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

Over the last several weeks, we've seen a lot of new listeners so I want to take a second and say thanks for listening and thank you for supporting the podcast. If you don't mind, please click the subscribe button. And you can follow us on Twitter [@_Pedagogue_](#) for news, updates, and book giveaways. You can also visit our site pedagoguepodcast.com, we have transcripts for every episode. In this episode, I talk with Jody Shipka about how she got into teaching, she reflects on multimodal pedagogy and multimodal assignments, and edible rhetoric and food studies.

Jody Shipka is an Associate Professor of English at University of Maryland, Baltimore County where she teaches courses in the Communication and Technology Track. She is the author of *Toward a Composition Made Whole* and the recipient of the 2018 Computers and Composition Charles Moran Award for Distinguished Contributions to the Field. Her work has appeared in *College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, *Computers and Composition*, *Composition Studies*, *enculturation*, and a number of edited collections.

Jody, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Can you tell us your story: how did you get interested in teaching and multimodality?

JS: I don't know when I became interested in teaching so much as I understood when I was admitted into the grad program, and I was a lit student, I didn't know rhet/comp existed at that point in time, but I knew that as part of continuing my work as a scholar-researcher, I would have to teach to pay the way. I remember vividly thinking, "All right, I know I'm going to suck at that and I'll probably get kicked out as a result of it," and I think part of that had to do with my lack of understanding of what teaching a writing class could be or would be. My sense was that it was about spelling, punctuation, and grammar, nothing I excel at. I am not an expert in that area and I never will be, right? I can catch other people's typos, but my own, I absolutely can't.

My sense going into it, I didn't understand I don't think what teaching was or would be, even though I was raised by a teacher, so I assumed I would suck at it. I think when I started enjoying it, and what I enjoy most about it, is when I can continue being a student in my classroom, and again, the sense was if my role in this classroom is to be an expert in, say, spelling and punctuation, I'm in big trouble because I don't have that expertise, right? I can't imagine if I was really, really good at those things how my teaching would be different, right? Would I just be somebody who would teach the class that way, like, "No, this isn't how you construct this"? I think that for me, it became something I enjoyed doing when I could learn from students, which again, you want to be careful about foregrounding how much you're a student in your own class,

because it begs the question of, "Well, what authority do you have?" Right? "Why are you being paid? Why are you leading this class?"

But I think that being able to say, and early on, my pedagogy was called, "Show me what's possible," so I give you a rough assignment, right? "This is what you need to do. You need to research. You need to do this, you need to do that," but what does the end result look like, right? Is it a song? Is it a live performance? What are the ways that you can satisfy these criteria that I never made any bones about the fact that I'm an expert in web design or I'm an expert in making videos. It was more a matter of I'm an expert in managing this and talking to you about the rhetorical impact of these things. That's what I know how to do, but you show me what's possible.

I have them do the statement of goals and choices, which regardless of what they create, they talk to me about what were their goals, who was their audience, that way we're having an exchange about how they're thinking about the work that they're doing and its impact, so I mean, it changes the way that I teach where it's not that I'm an expert in that final form, but an expert in having these conversations about if you change this variable. What happens if the audience is different, if this is the assumption, if this were found 50 years from now, right?

But I think that's when I began enjoying teaching is when I'm learning as much, if not more than students, and when I say that, I mean, I think oftentimes the person teaching the class cares the most about what happens in that classroom, so I don't... I have absolutely no illusions of the fact that work that I found amazing, students were like, "All right, I just did that," right? It didn't mean as much. That's what I'm saying, that I'm learning more about things, but I think that that's when I probably first enjoyed it is to feel like, "Okay, I don't need to be an expert in spelling, punctuation."

I always tell students when they say, "Well, what do you want?" or, "Do you like my project?" I oftentimes say, "Look, if it were edible and leopard print, I would love it, but I'm not guessing those are your goals, right? What is it that you want to accomplish? Because I'm not looking at whether I like that final product, but I'm looking at the choices that you're making in bringing that together and suggesting ways that you can think a little bit differently about those choices and those goals."

SW: Okay so I have to ask a follow up – Jody Skipka, first day of teaching, you step into the writing classroom. What were you like and how were you feeling?

JS: I don't know, because I'm sure that I was scared to death, right? I think it was a Michelle Pfeiffer movie, *Dangerous Minds*, where I think my idea was that I would go in there and say, "Okay, this is what we're going to do today," and people would be like, "Fuck you, I'm not going to do that. You can't make me do that," and I would go, "Okay." I don't know, and again, where I did my grad work, the students for the most part were very obedient, so I don't know where I was getting this sense that I would walk into a classroom and it would be straight-up revolt.

At that time, it was you used a common textbook, you used a somewhat common syllabus, so I had things mapped out. It wasn't like I was going in and saying, "Show me what's possible," on the first day. If anything, I mean, and I make no bones about this, I was very much underlying your thesis statement. I think for me, it was more a matter of wanting not to have student pushback or revolt, which is the other thing to make clear and I don't know how much. As a lit student, I was told explicitly by the person I went there to work with, and it wasn't just me, it was everybody, "Don't get carried away with your teaching. That's not what you're here for," so I think part of that, it was always teaching was my hobby, as I saw it, and it wasn't something that if I spent a lot of time on, I would let people know about that.

Where I think things changed is knowing there were other people in my cohort who were in rhet/comp who could talk about teaching. They weren't just teaching. I understood that, but teaching and their scholarship came together more than I think it did for me or that I felt that it could, so certainly with my awareness of my other colleagues who were in rhet/comp and then eventually taking classes really changed the way that I thought about writing, composing, teaching, my relationship between teaching and scholarship, so I think a lot of that fed into it, too, and certainly, had I not gotten the support that I did for my early experiments, I don't know that I would have continued.

I mean, I think one of the things that I'm most sensitive to is that voice in my head, even though I never heard it from anybody in grad school or in my job, like "That's not your job. Teach them a thesis statement, teach them spelling and punctuation," so in the back of my mind, there was always this feeling of "Maybe I'm not doing what I'm supposed to be doing," and I remember when I did my... I think I passed special fields or something and I said, "I believe entirely in what I'm doing, I just don't know that I'm the person to do it," because always that sense of, "What if I'm not doing what I'm supposed to be doing?" Right? And students would say, "Shipka, this matters. We're thinking differently about communication," and so oftentimes, it was the students every time that I would get afraid or...

And I had absolutely no doubt in my mind that nobody would hire me, but for me, the grad school wasn't a means to an end. I could have been happy being a waitress for the rest of my life and I'd probably have more respect and more money than in academia. Even if I didn't get a job in this field, which is so conservative, I felt I wanted to tell these students' stories, so if nothing else, I wanted to do the book or whatever, even if I was going to go back to waitressing, so I think that was one thing, too, is that I always had this sense, "I could go back to waitressing," so it never felt like academia was the be-all and end-all and I think that gave me a little bit more freedom in ways that other people felt like "I have to do this."

Even with students, it's that my ideal student is somebody who's there that because they want to learn, which is a big ask, right, with everything else that's going on, but that's how I approach school. I was waitressing, I wanted to know stuff, so I went to the community college and started taking classes and that led to other things.

SW: How did waitressing influence your approach to teaching or how you saw yourself as a teacher, or what you wanted to do in the writing classroom or what you wanted the classroom to be?

JS: I had no intention to go to grad school, but I was a career waitress for 13 years and I oftentimes joke that those 13 years taught me more about rhetoric than any class I ever took and with due respect to reading about the canons of rhetoric or whatever, I was living it for 13 years. I was living the fact that what food can do, how food can be persuasive, how food mediates so many different relationships for good or for ill and so I think that those years of waitressing really impacted, more than anything else, how I teach and how I think about this space of the classroom and how I want students to think.

For me, I understood as a waitress the goal, right, is to take care of people, to find out what they want, to do what I need to do to bring that food to them, right? But I understood quite quickly there's not one way to do that and in my particular situation, at minimum, I had nine to twelve tables at a time, so I needed, if I was sat all at once, I needed to understand how do I prioritize this? What do these diners want? Do they want a high-end service? Do they want a standup routine? But it was always that sense of, and quite literally, turning my back on one table, I would become somebody different. My tone of voice would change, the pace of my body.

I think in that way, it impacts how I teach and what I ask students to think about, not in terms of becoming a waitress, but that idea of there's a general goal, but there's many ways to go about doing that and what is it that you can do, right? What are the risks that you can take? But I can't imagine how I would teach or what I would be like if, for instance, I didn't take those 13 years to do something else, and particularly, waiting on tables.

SW: I want to talk about your research interests in multimodal pedagogy. How would you define a multimodal approach to composition?

JS: A multimodal approach to composition names part of what I do, but not all of what I do and so for me, what's been really important is to remind people to advocate for the position that a multimodal approach to writing or to composing includes but is not limited to the digital and so I think beyond the square or rectangle of the paper or the screen, there are so many other modes and senses that we can draw on to make meaning, to tell our stories, to move people to some kind of action or emotion, and so I've been really clear about that and bothered by the ongoing conflation of multi-modality is necessarily digital media or new media.

The other thing that I think is really important with a mind toward the kind of multimodal practice that I advocate is thinking about new media in a historical context and to recognize, as Jason Palmeri and other people have talked about, that all media at one point or time was new and came with its own struggles and baggage and having to get used to that and finding a place for it.

I'm mindful of that, that old analog forms of communication or media can be new to the user or new to the user's purpose, and so I've been really, really mindful of that, that when we talk about new media, it's not just digital and to think about... I routinely have students compose on clay tablets and so this is new to them and comes with a whole lot of questions about, "How do I use this? What do I use it for? How does it cause my body to work?" Right? And so I think in both cases, we need to be mindful that multimodality includes but is not limited to the digital and also, we need to think about the newness of media, not only historically, but in the biography or lifespan of the user.

SW: What multimodal assignments do you use in and beyond first-year composition? And what would you say is the biggest source of resistance for students in terms of perceiving and interacting with these types of assignments?

JS: The assignments that I use, and even the advantages and disadvantages for first-year comp, are things that I've covered in a lot of my early publications, in my book, and whatnot. Since taking this particular job here at University of Maryland, Baltimore County in 2005, I'm only able to teach first-year comp on very, very slight occasion, so one of the reasons I was interested in this job is how would I apply this framework to something beyond first-year comp, so undergrad track in communication and technology. A lot of the assignments that I did in first-year comp have been ones that I've modified for courses I teach now.

One of my approaches to multimodality privileges choice, so it becomes a matter... I mean, I think early on people misunderstood my work as demonizing print linear forms. I've really tried to underscore, even though a lot of students choose to do things other than a standard-looking research paper, that is always an option for them to pursue. It's always been about what is it that you want to accomplish, right, what work do you want your work to do, and thinking about that: What choices do you have, right? What are the final forms that would allow you to do that? If the work is you want to inform, you want to persuade, you want to humor, what are the ways of doing that, right?

There are many ways to be able to do that, so part of my approach to multimodality has been about privileging choice, but that means making students responsible for what we're... There'll always be non-negotiable elements to an assignment, but there's a lot of choice there and I think that more than anything else has been the resistance, that students tend to be more comfortable with or used to being given an assignment that says, "You must do this, this, this, and this," and my assignments tend to be, "Here's a situation," right? "How can you respond to that?" Right? "What work are you doing?"

We start early on in the classes where if my goal is to tell you something about my life, what options do I have to do that? A memoir, a scrapbook, a home movie, a diary, so students see right away that it's not about privileging the final form, but about that work that you want or need to do, and then it becomes, "What ways could we accomplish that?" Not all of those ways are

going to be socially acceptable. Not all of those ways are going to get you the job or the A or whatever the goal is, but to have students always think about, "I did this, but I could have done this, this, and this," and then it becomes, "What's the difference?"

An example that I use is there's no reason why, if you go for a job interview, that you couldn't go into the building and write your resume in lipstick on a mirror, right? And you sit down for the interview and they, "Can I have your resume?" "Well, it's in the bathroom," right? This is probably not going to get you the job, but it could be done, right, if you're containing that information, and so it becomes a discussion of "Here are all the ways we could solve this communicative task, but which ones are socially acceptable?" I think this gets to genre, right? How much can you push up against genres? How much bagginess or elasticities does it have?

I'll tell students that going through school, I tended to be a person who needed to get the A, for many reasons, scholarship, but every time I did an assignment, I would do what I thought the teacher wanted, the occasion wanted, but in my mind, I thought, "But I could have done this, this, or this." Certainly, in my work, I want to facilitate a kind of rhetorical and material flexibility, but oftentimes for students who just want to be told, "What do I need to do?", to not have to think about what they could do or what they should do. Some people love that, other people, it really, really gets them out of their comfort zone, so I would say that that is the biggest source of resistance, not that it's multimodal, but that it's about: Here's the problem to solve. How are you going to do that? Who's your audience? What is the purpose for this work?

SW: Your teaching and research interests include edible rhetoric. What does it look like to intersect food studies with composition pedagogy in the classroom?

JS: First and foremost, the notion of edible rhetoric is what I'm working on now: How can food be used to not only persuade, but to memorialize, to divide, to persuade, to instruct? This has been something that has been separate. I feel like my early iteration of my career and the way that I understand it, the teaching and the research were one and the same.

Since then, as I've been working, it's always been about process, processes of composing and multimodal composing, but in my second phase, when I started collecting memory artifacts from primarily dead people, that was very separate from the work that I did in the classroom. It was still focused on composing.

To date, I have not given anybody an assignment that has to do with food or a class that deals with edible rhetoric. That said, I've always encouraged students, "Can you compose with food? What does that mean?" Particularly at a time with, I think digital media, this idea that you can create something and share it widely and that it will stay around longer than something else that was written on a shirt, say, that to me, composing with food, took that to an extreme, what does it mean to compose something that's not going to be around for a long time, because it's meant to be eaten, because it will decay? What does it mean to compose something that somebody quite literally internalizes, becomes part of them, right?

I've had students, I had somebody who early on who baked their portfolio into a cake. People write with meat, and that was a vegetarian, so that was really difficult for her to do that. Write with chocolate. Probably the most known, not that I've ever written about this, I've presented on it fairly recently, is a student who had composed with half-cooked chicken and for her part of the impact of her work was the olfactory, that it needed to rot before I received it. I'm really interested in the kind of engagement that you can't get from a paper or you can't get from the screen, the textural, the olfactory. I think the rhetoric of smell is greatly overlooked.

I think it's always been there, that interest in, can you compose with food and what does that look like, and particularly other than just writing on a cake, right? Certainly, because I share, I think it's important for students to understand that their teachers are also students and researchers and learning things and struggling with things, so I've shared my research with people and I bring in cookbooks and stuff like that and food that I've cooked.

*SW: For those interested in multimodal pedagogy and assignments, your book, *Toward a Composition Made Whole*, is phenomenal and I think it's foundational for this kind of work. You mentioned earlier how you include case studies and assignments in that book, so I want to end with this question. What would you say to the person or the teacher interested in adopting a multimodal approach to teaching, and are there other texts and/or resources you would recommend?*

JS: The answer is different depending on how you see your approach, right? Is the multimodal going to be mostly digital? If so, are you going to tell students what they need to make? Is it going to be more open-ended and choice-based? I hate talking about readings or because I think it just privileges certain people, right? There are a lot of people out there that are doing amazing things, but might be talking about those on blogs or podcasts or something, but for me, it's been more of the affective or disposition-type questions, particularly if it's a multimodal choice-based approach. I think part of what that requires, just as a kind of mindset, is a willingness and the ability to communicate to students that you're learning with them.

Not everybody can do that in the same way, and as I said before, I think it's a risk to be able to foreground "I'm a student in this class, too," right, particularly for students who expect you to know the answer, to know what's right. It's that willingness to learn a privileging of flexibility, being willing, both for the student and the teacher to continue to question, to linger in the uncertainty, to not privilege efficiency.

I would say to my students, "Inquiry ends with judgment and our job is to put off the judgment as long as we possibly can, right, to continue to think about how could this be different, right? If we do things in this way, who does that privilege? Who does that silence? Who does that ...?" Students had taught me this time and time again, "Shipka, you're good at words, but you know what? Some of us think differently. We make our argument. We have our effects through dance, through song," and it became one of those things where I'm like, "Oh, all right, well, how's that

going to work? How can a dance make an argument?" They showed me, right? Or some have shown me.

I think that for this kind of approach that is beyond the digital, that is choice-based, there needs to be a willingness to trust that students will make good decisions and that is always really, really scary, and I've had to at times say, "But not this, but not that," right, in terms of what they can work with or how they can work with it, putting things online now. I always tell students, please make sure it's password-protected because some of the stuff that they do for my assignments, they're going for verisimilitude, and so they'll be talking about something that looks like this product actually exists and I said, "Make sure that you don't put it out there and say this was for a project."

But I think in terms of something that I discovered very early on and that I missed when I moved here is to teach the way that I teach, particularly if you're going to collect this stuff and research it, you need space. You need space and so I would have people who would be adjuncting or something and then they might have a desk one day a week, right? How do you do this kind of work? I think that becomes difficult.

I had a woman for a project had turned in a curio cabinet, and I've got a somewhat decent office, it's not really that big, but the thing must have been five feet by three feet and then maybe three feet deep filled with stuff, so what happens if you're teaching 60 students, right? At a certain point, you have no room in the office, so I think that that really does become a consideration. As a grad student, I happen to have a very large office and I had a closet that I could house all of my student work that was donated to me, but I think that's important.

I think another thing that's really crucial for teaching, anyway, I guess, but this way in particular, for a long time, people would see, I would show them student final products and the connection was, this is the assignment. If I give the students this assignment, this is what it will result in, and I think that's never been the case. It's in order to get those assignments, I'm working every day through the readings that I assigned, through the mini-activities that we do in class all to underscore this way of teaching.

And I've always said, if you are calling all the shots for students early on and then you give them an open-ended assignment, they're not going to understand that, right? You've been telling us all along what we need to do and so I think that was another miscommunication, that what I did is not represented in the assignments or in the final products, but it is every day building on this kind of outcome.

The other thing is to see yourself as an expert in something, like if I were to teach a course, which wouldn't happen, on designing macarons, right, I pretty much have an idea of what that's supposed to look like. If I had students all doing that, I could see myself going, "Oh, no, aesthetically, that doesn't work," or, "Why is it just one color?", or, "Why isn't it ...?" and so I

think it really helped me that I never felt like an expert in writing, or probably not: "Who's staffing the sections?" But I never felt like an expert in that.

I think students have helped me become more of an expert where now, I've seen so many things in my time of teaching this way that students will now say, "Well, I was kind of thinking about doing an object argument." "Oh, well, let me tell you about these other ones that I've seen," right? These often take more time to grade, the projects that I get, so again, with a mind toward people who don't have an office space, who might be freeway fliers, who are dealing with 120 students, right? I understand my privilege as a grad student and now having smaller classes and being able to do this.

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