

Episode 11: John Duffy

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with John Duffy, a professor of English at the University of Notre Dame. John has published on the ethics of writing, the rhetoric of disability, and the historical development of literacy in cross-cultural contexts. In his most recent book, *Provocations of Virtue: Rhetoric, Ethics, and the Teaching of Writing*, he examines the ethical dimensions of teaching writing in a post-truth world. John is the co-editor of *Literacy, Economy, and Power*. And his book, *Writing from These Roots* was awarded the 2009 Outstanding Book Award by the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

I look up to John's work on ethics, and what it means to consider traditionally historical frameworks on rhetoric in our teaching practices, to reinvent or perhaps even renew our understandings of rhetorical traditions. I've really been inspired by his work, and my pedagogy has been influenced by his writings.

I feel like I have the good fortune of calling John a friend. We've chatted on multiple occasions, and he's always been so supportive of my work, my teaching, my writing. I would encourage everyone to read his article, "The Good Writer: Virtue Ethics and the Teaching of Writing," in which he suggests teachers think more about moral philosophies, specifically virtue ethics, as principle to understanding the teaching of writing. He offers good questions like, "What kind of ethics are we teaching? What traditions, norms, or values inform the ethics we offer students? How do we as teachers of writing define ethics?" All are really good questions, and we'll explore some of these in this conversation.

Thanks for joining us, John.

SW: How about we get started with ethics, and what it means to consider ethics through teaching? Do you mind sharing first, what led you to this subject and how ethics better informs teaching writing?

JD: I would say that I was in a period of professional discouragement. I had been observing, like a lot of people in our field do, the progress of contemporary public discourse, which was and has been for several decades now, increasingly divisive, polarized, and violent. And things kind of came to a head for me when Gabrielle Giffords was shot in 2011. 18 people were shot, 6 of them died. And I, at the time, made a mistake that I often counsel my students not to make, which was a cause and effect relationship. I assumed that the shooter was motivated by the kind of extremist rhetoric that was coming from the right, political right. Now in retrospect that it seems to be a much more complicated thing than that and seems to have a lot to do with mental illness. But nonetheless, it got me thinking about, what are we doing in our field?

We have a sort of grand tradition, the rhetorical inheritance, and we work towards citizenship and the good community and so forth. And I just began asking myself, given the work we do, we

seem so disconnected from the reality of public discourse, even though we're teaching things that should be influencing public discourse. So that was one question. Why was that true? And then the other question was what, what might we be doing that we're not doing now? And I want to stress that, that's a hard question to answer because I think that the work that we're doing now is so good. I mean, I really do. You look from program to program and you look at the scholarship and it's so impressive. But it did seem to me that the more I read, the more I started to think about the role of ethics in the teaching of writing.

Not that we should be teaching ethics, but it seemed to me that we were already teaching ethics. We were teaching practices of ethical discourse but we weren't naming those practices. They were implicit in what we were doing. Now, I don't mean that there wasn't a single person or teacher or program doing that but I mean, in general, if you look at our scholarship, there's not a lot of attention paid to ethics. We've embraced Aristotle's rhetoric and we've mostly ignored Aristotle's ethics. And so, I started to look into that, and to see how that might inform my work here at Notre Dame as a writing program administrator, but also what it might have to say in the field. So that's how I got started on.

SW: In your article, "The Good Writer," you write, "As teachers of writing, we are always already engaged in the teaching of rhetorical ethics, and that the teaching of writing necessarily and inevitably moves us into ethical reflections and decision-making." I think it might be good to specify first how you are talking about ethics. Can you talk more about what you mean by that, and how teachers are always inevitably teaching practices of ethical communication?

JD: Typically, when we talk about ethics, there are two traditions in the West that have been dominant, the so-called Big Two. One is deontology, which is the ethics of obligation, the idea that there are certain things that are categorically and indisputably right and indisputably wrong. So for example, torture. We might say that that is categorically wrong and should never be done. The most famous practitioner of this is Immanuel Kant, who talked about the categorical imperative, which was the sort of thing like if you would will it for everybody under all conditions, then it is categorically imperative. The other tradition is consequentialism of the ethics of outcomes, where you try to base moral decisions on what is going to promote the greatest good or happiness for the greatest number of people. And I have argued that both of those traditions have influenced the way we teach writing.

When we teach students historically, I mean, when we've taught students about grammar, when we've taught students about usage rules, that's often framed categorically, right? These are the rules, and if you break them, if you violate them, you are doing something wrong, you're an error. We've also been influenced, I think, by consequentialist ethics, in the sense that we rank in order our students, we grade their papers, we create consequences, and we base the goodness of a writing assignment or a task or product on how well it promotes a good consequence. So, those traditions have been prevalent, I think, in our classrooms, again, mostly implicitly. But it seemed to me that neither of those really captured the ethical dimensions of our work. And I started to think in terms of practices, like what do our practices tell us about ethics?

And so, the example that I've used many times is, in an argument, when we teach students to write a claim, we are presuming or there is an assumption that in making that claim the students

are going to be truthful, that they're not going to make claims that are knowingly dishonest. Because if they do, their arguments won't be successful, for the most part. I mean, you can always think of exceptions. But similarly, when we teach students all the things we teach about evidence, about its sufficiency, its adequacy, its relevancy, we are in a sense teaching them to be accountable. We're saying that you have to be able to stand up and defend the claims you make or substantiate the claims you make.

And the final example that I use often is when we teach students that they need to look at alternative points of view, if only to address those points of view, we're teaching practices of intellectual open-mindedness, intellectual generosity, and intellectual courage. Because it's hard to read people you fundamentally disagree with, and read them to the end and try to really think about their arguments. But this is what we're asking students to do. So those things: truthfulness, accountability, open-mindedness, courage, they're part of another ethical tradition. And that's tradition of the virtues. So, when I talk about ethics, I'm talking about the kind of ethics that moral philosophers call virtue ethics. It's rooted in Aristotle, it's rooted in Confucius before Aristotle. We are teaching practices. In those practices, inherent in those practices, are what I would call rhetorical virtues.

And when I say rhetorical virtues, I simply mean the discursive enactment of virtue. So, for example, if we were to say that accountability is a desirable quality, it's a virtue. And that's what virtues are, they're qualities that promote sort of individual excellence and social excellence and cohesion. When we teach students to write and think of their writing in terms of ethical practices, we are teaching rhetorical virtues. And since we're teaching the practices, as I'm saying, they're inherent in the practice. We're teaching virtues or discursive enactments of virtue, whether we acknowledge that or not. It's implicit in our work. So, this is not a call for a whole new way of like let's throw out everything we've done, that writing across writing was the wrong approach or genre studies is the wrong approach. That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying that whatever approach we take, there are going to be moments of ethical deliberation and ethical decision-making on the part of the writer and, to some extent, the teacher. And what I'm suggesting is we acknowledge those things, that we make those implicit qualities explicit in our classroom discourse.

SW: A key part of this work is our understanding of virtue, which has some historical criticisms. How do you address those complicated histories?

JD: Yeah. When I first started this project, I encountered some of the... Frankly, I was unaware of a lot of the historical lineage of the word virtue. I just knew personally, I didn't like the word very much. Like a lot of people, I associated it with kind of private morality and sort of sexuality and so forth. But it's got a much richer and in many ways, a darker history than that. Feminist philosophers, some feminist philosophers, object to virtue, in the sense that it has a very misogynistic history, which it absolutely does. There are certain people, certain philosophers who have pointed out that the word virtue has been appropriated by people on the ideological right who have used it in a sense to lay the blame or to explain poverty and inequality, to locate that within individuals.

Then finally, there's people who associate virtue with particular religious traditions like Catholicism. And if it's associated with one tradition, then it's exclusionary. Because if I'm a Muslim, what do I get out of Catholic conceptions of virtue? And so all those objections to virtue, I think, are real and I think they have to be responded to. But I would say that, in many ways, they have. There are feminist philosophers now who argue for a version of feminist virtue ethics. There are moral philosophers who have laid out the foundations of a critical virtue ethics, where virtue ethics is used in conditions of oppression and resistance. And then any historical study of virtue makes it very clear that it's not the property of any single religion. So, I think that virtue is always going to have, or at least for us, is going to have certain contradictions and tensions built into it.

I think the best thing to do is embrace those tensions and see what we learn from them. What does those tensions tell us about the use of the word today? What can they tell us about the use of the word? As an analogy, I would look at the word rhetoric, which has had a very checkered history. And yet, for those of us who study it, it's a dynamic word that has to do with the way language functions, the way society functions, the way identities are created, and so forth. I think the best answer to that question is to embrace those tensions, and see what we learn from engaging them.

SW: This somewhat reminds me of conversations around civility. What's our role as teachers in the writing classroom, our relationship with our local communities, or our commitments to nonacademic spaces? What should we be teaching? And are there certain attitudes and behaviors we should be reinforcing? I imagine you might get some of these questions about civility with your work on ethics and virtue. So, some people might be curious about if virtue is just another way to talk about civility. Do you mind talking about that relationship or lack thereof?

JD: I don't know that we can say civility is a terrible thing, but civility is an equivocal word. On the one hand, it has long stood for, it comes from *civitas*, it comes from the citizen, it comes from community. And it stands in the best sense for respectfulness, for courtesy, for tolerance. But, as many scholars have pointed out, civility can also be used as a way to suppress dissent, as a way to expunge unpopular or seemingly radical ideas, ideas that threaten existing structures of power. People have used civility that way. It's a way to keep people down and not to let justifiable anger take place. The virtues offer, in my opinion, a much more robust and exacting and demanding vocabulary. We're not talking about civility, we're talking about specific qualities like truthfulness, accountability.

The other thing I would say about the virtues is it reserves the place, as I mentioned a moment ago, for justifiable anger, for righteous indignation. So as one philosopher has put it, the correct response to injustice is not tempered forbearance or civility, but it is righteous indignation. There are times when we should be pissed off, and there are times when we should be speaking and acting in ways that organize, protest, and dissent. And civility has a place but it's not a universal place. The virtues admit a broader range of responses to social conditions.

SW: I'm thinking about what is commonly drawn on from classical rhetorical traditions in the first-year writing classroom, such as the rhetorical appeals: ethos, pathos, and logos. Of course,

writing pedagogies have done a lot to challenge and move away from focusing solely on Western rhetorical traditions, including these modes of persuasion. So we have been invited to consider and reimagine the writing classroom, and what we bring into that classroom, how our practices and assignments and materials are excluding individuals and communities, or creating inclusive space for other ways of thinking and being. I'm really curious, given your research in ethics and virtue ethics, how this work looks in your writing classroom. How does this change the way we teach writing?

JD: I would say that the primary change is the willingness on the part of the teacher to engage these qualities explicitly. So for example, when we're teaching students to write an argument, to spend some time talking about the ethical dimensions of that argument, to point out to them that evidence is not simply to win the day, but it also has an ethical dimension to it. When we write a counter-argument, it's not simply so that we can hold up the other side to defeat that side. Here's the counter-argument, here's why it's wrong. And that's perfectly legitimate. I'm not saying we shouldn't do that. People namely argue to win and I'm not saying that we give up on that. But I am saying that in that process, we point out to students that the choices they make say something about the kind of people they are or that they want to be, and about the kind of audiences that they want to, in a sense, instantiate, the kind of audiences they want to call forth.

What's the word from [Paul] Auster say? Interpolate, right? I'm saying that it's useful and indeed, it's necessary to talk about those qualities. Because if we consider the state of our public discourse today, how toxic it is, how violent it is, how uncompromising it is, how bent on the destruction of people we disagree with, our democratic process is not well. And I think we have this opportunity to say to students, there's a different way to argue, and there's a way to argue that says something about who you are, who you want to be, and the kind of society in which you want to live. That's where, I think, we can talk about this or we should be talking about this in the classroom. The arguments begin with listening.

One of the things I tell students is that the first quality that we want to develop when we're going to make an argument is, we want to know something about the topic. We want knowledge. Knowledge is a virtue. And that's a kind of listening. When you go and read, if I'm going to make an argument about immigration, about the border, about climate, there's an obligation or presumption that I should know something about what I'm about to say. If I go out and read, then I'm learning. When I listen to others, I'm learning from them. So I think gaining knowledge about our topics, whether it's reading or whether it's through listening, is the very first thing that we need to be talking about with students.

SW: You teach at Notre Dame, John, a private Catholic institution. Their mission statement talks about the development of mind, body, spirit, and pursuing truth and justice. How has teaching in this institutional context influenced your thinking?

JD: I see this work as being secular, and I don't see it as limited to Catholic or private institutions. When I first started doing this, someone told me, "That's fine for Notre Dame but that won't work for my students at this public university." And I remember thinking, what a constraining way to understand your students, as though they don't care about things like truthfulness and open-mindedness and intellectual courage. Of course, they do. So, I don't see

this as a product of the Catholic environment of Notre Dame. That said, there are a lot of people here, several at Notre Dame who do work in virtue ethics. Some of them are very well-known, and they've been very generous in allowing me to ask questions and sit down and talk with them. So in that way, this has been a great place to germinate some of these ideas.

SW: Thanks, John. That's all for this episode of Pedagogue. Thank you for listening and following along. Until next time.