

Episode 96: Kate Stephenson

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Kate Stephenson about community-engaged pedagogy, establishing partnerships with community organizations, community gardens and food justice, and institutional support for community-engaged learning.

Kate Stephenson is an Assistant Professor in the Writing and Rhetoric Program at the University of Virginia, where she teaches community engaged courses on food justice and housing equity. Kate founded the biannual Community Writing Symposium, which showcases community-based writing and research created by undergraduates, non-profits, and community members. Currently a Faculty Fellow at the Center for Teaching Excellence, Kate has presented work at numerous conferences and is writing an article about the pedagogical possibilities engaged learning provides for challenging notions of local history, activism, and knowledge creation. Kate is also collaborating with The Haven, a local shelter for the unhoused, to produce a print version of a literary and visual arts digital publication, *Voices*, featuring work by Haven guests, staff, and volunteers.

Kate, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your approach to teaching focuses and really centers on community-engaged learning and community-engaged practices. I was hoping that we could start by you talking more about what got you interested in this pedagogical approach to teaching and what it looks like to draw from community-engaged practices and pedagogies to teach writing?

*KS: Thanks for having me on *Pedagogue*, Shane. I listen to your podcast all the time, and I'm just really excited to be here. I'm grateful to Steve Parks, too, for connecting us. He is my colleague here at UVA and has been such an active part of our community engagement program and is always such a generous colleague. So I'm really happy that he was able to connect us.*

I found myself trying to engage my students in first-year writing classes and just kind of hitting a wall. I taught all kinds of different themes trying to get them involved. I taught about the Harlem Renaissance. I taught about photography, the American dream, and I was still just trying to find a way to get them...to see how their words could matter. And so finally, I'm teaching this class on photography and I told the students, you're going to design your own photo essay. I don't care what it's about. I just want you to be passionate about it. I expected they would go off and maybe talk about a day in the life of themselves. You know, some did come back with sort of like their favorite study place, not the most inspiring photo essays. But a bunch of them came back with photo essays about civic responsibility or about places where they were volunteering or trying to make a difference. I had a couple great essays on environmentalism and sustainability. I had one student who just wrote really movingly about a tutoring relationship he developed through Big Brothers, Big Sisters.

So these projects stood out to me as just having this kind of spark that a lot of the other writing I'd seen my students do, it just didn't have. I thought, how can I kind of tap into this and really harness it? And I have always been really interested in working in the community. I've always been especially interested in food justice and working at the local food pantry, worked in community gardens, things like that. And so always thought that was really separate from my job and my career. And then this moment kind of taught me, how can we bring those things together? How can we get students to really find purpose in their writing in a different way?

That kind of strangely coincided with this really horrible moment in Charlottesville in 2017, which most of your listeners I'm sure are familiar with, August 12th when the alt-right invaded our city. It was a really traumatic time for people who lived here, for students who are also involved in that, and I think the kind of grief and trauma associated with that really changed the way I teach and the way I think a lot of my colleagues think about teaching as well. Suddenly it was like history was very present and we felt the need to do something different. I know I did, felt the need to do something different in my classroom. I think those two things kind of coincided and really resonated to reshape my pedagogy and got me thinking about how can I help my students connect to other communities beyond just the ivory tower that we're so used to kind of sitting and thinking and writing in.

Charlottesville, I think, gives a really unique opportunity for this and UVA does, but in some ways it's not really unique at all. There's so many Charlottesville's across the country. I feel like this community-engaged teaching, this approach, allows us to think about the ways that the academic classroom can overlap with communities beyond the walls of our university. So that's really sort of how I got involved or started thinking about this.

But I mean, really you're asking about sort of like the approach to community-engaged teaching and I guess what that sort of looks like in the classroom. I think a lot of that rests on the notion of audience and getting students to see how their words can circulate and have an impact and how they can write beyond just the student professor relationship or even student to student relationship. I think this move towards public writing and working with people in different bases than the university really kind of opens them up to making connections, making relationships, thinking about how their words relate to history, to the present, to equity, to civic responsibility. I think those kind of philosophical ideas have really kind of driven what I'm doing. I think for students, there are so many kind of benefits to this kind of engagement, and some of them, I didn't think about at all when I started. I think one of them is the connections that they develop to each other outside the classroom. I think that really impacts the quality of learning and writing that happens inside the classroom too.

SW: So you're talking about your interest and investment in community-engaged practices, and I'm really curious as to how you go about establishing these relationships between your classroom and community organizations. I'm thinking about this from a practical perspective. What does it look like to develop successful, sustainable community-driven partnerships?

KS: I mean, I think that's really at the core of all of this, how do you actually...first of all, I think establish the partnership yourself as an instructor? Because we work on these 15-week semesters and you know many of your listeners have probably read *Tactics of Hope* by Paula Mathieu,

where she talks about how the real world doesn't go on these 15-week academic semesters. So I think these partnerships really have to start with the instructor. All the places that my students volunteer, I have worked at for a sustained amount of time. So my two classes right now, one is partnered with the Haven, which is our local homeless shelter, and I've worked there probably four or five years now, maybe longer, in lots of different roles, most recently helping to lead their writer circle there.

One of the advantages of that, too, is not just that I know the people there, but also that I'm working alongside my students lots of time. We have time together outside the classroom as well, which is really nice. The other class is themed around food justice. I've worked in the community gardens, also in the food pantry, where students also work each week. So outside of class, they're working at one of these locations for two hours a week. And you know, some semesters, we have a whole class project that develops. Last year we put together a digital magazine with the Haven, but then sometimes they're more student designed projects in collaboration with the partner. So they'll let me know, "Here's what we need. We would love some blogs for our newsletter. We would love someone to think about how to train volunteers better, or we would like to raise awareness and help running our Instagram," things like that.

I try to have my students really collaborate with the partner so that they're not writing things that are useless to that partner, whoever it is. But I think it's really about relationships. It's about helping students figure out how to make connections. Amazingly, sometimes that happens just by being there week after week. I think particularly at the Haven, it's interesting to see how students connect with people who are unhoused in ways that might be really unexpected. You know, I think for a lot of my 18-year-old first-year students, they haven't been to a homeless shelter before. Some of them may have some housing instability in their background, they may have dealt with eviction or just moving sometimes from place to place because of financial instability. But by and large, it's not an issue that many of them have had personal experience with.

Reading about that, doing a lot of work in the academic classroom helps, but then actually being at the Haven and talking to people and being vulnerable, I think, and learning not just with their heads but also with their hearts and their bodies. We talk a lot about that. I think, too, that it's interesting how people connect to that age group, 18 to 24. Everyone has advice to give a college student, right? Like they're on the cusp of everything. In a lot of ways, they're not threatening in the ways that sort of older volunteers or staff members are. They aren't giving out the housing vouchers. They aren't deciding what kinds of benefits or privileges people can get. So there is a sort of really nice connection that can develop there that comes out of what we might see as disadvantages, right, like lack of experience or naivete, but it actually can work to an advantage if they're prepared well, I think.

SW: Kate, so I'm really interested in how you facilitate conversations in class around housing equity and food justice and other local situations and national issues around social justice. How do you invite students to engage in these conversations in class before and while they're engaged with community organizations?

KS: That's a great question, because it's really difficult. We start on the second day of class before we've done any readings...they don't go into the community partner spaces until probably four weeks into the semester, so there's a lot of careful preparation and discussion that goes into just getting them ready for those experiences. But I think we begin with conversations about discussion guidelines, which I think a lot of teachers probably use now, right? We spend a whole class period talking about how do we want our discussions to go. How do we want to behave in these moments when maybe somebody in class says something that offends you? Maybe your feelings are hurt in some way, or maybe you're just feeling not heard because maybe the readings are too White centered or maybe there's bias in my teaching that I'm not aware of too. I'm sure there is.

We start with a pretty in-depth conversation. It starts with small groups and then we get bigger, and we bring a list of, "Here's what we want to have happen in our discussions about race, about White supremacy, about social justice, about being uncomfortable." And it's different from semester to semester, but we always come up with a set of practices, too. Like what happens if you have that sort of unsettled feeling? Do you feel comfortable saying something in class? Maybe you say something afterward, maybe you write something down. I also have...it's called "Collab" for us, but it's our LMS platform that we use to teach. There's an anonymous section where people can also give their comments that way. We basically come up with a contract in class for how we're going to behave, and I also make it a point to tell them about my mistakes because we all make mistakes.

I make it a point to tell them, "Here are the times recently and you know, the ones that really stick with me that I'll never forget." I invite them to tell me when I said something or done something that makes them uncomfortable or seems to go against the values of the class. I think coming up with these guidelines is really important and then checking in about them throughout the semester. I think that opens up the space for people to be able to talk more honestly. And then, I mean, some of it is choosing readings, I feel like, that really represent a wide range of perspectives and helping students to ground their comments in those readings as well. I also have an intern for each of my classes. It's someone...it's a student, usually a second-year who's taken the class before.

This is actually really important for I think the sort of feel of the classroom because they check in with the students at least twice during the semester, so they can let me know how the class is feeling about discussions, about anything really, but it provides them with a way to give that feedback. I think that actually really helps as well. But the actual, I mean, I think the actual conversations can be really difficult. We're used to being comfortable. UVA is a predominantly White university and we're used to sort of the hierarchy of the classroom as well, so finding ways to kind of break that down, we use a lot of rhetorical listening exercises. We use a lot of moments where we pause to write as well when things get really difficult.

I think one of the challenges in this kind of teaching is, and I use this term because it comes from a student, is the despair that comes usually towards the middle of the semester. Sometimes it can be earlier. Because these are hard topics and they feel sometimes really insurmountable to all of us, not just the students. So trying to figure out what to do with the emotional weight of these topics and the discussions can be really difficult. I don't think I have a great answer for that, but

just being transparent about it and giving students space to talk about issues like this, I think is really important. Because a lot of them say this is one of the few times where they get to talk to each other in not always a comfortable, but at least a respected atmosphere. Yesterday we actually talked about anger. We used Audre Lorde's essay, "The Uses of Anger," and then Brittney Cooper, her introduction to *Eloquent Rage*, it was a difficult conversation. How do we perceive anger? Why is it dismissed? What does that mean for different groups?

And you know, really it was a difficult discussion. After class a student came up and said this is the first time I've talked about this, this is the first time where I've really understood that anger is a natural emotion, that I shouldn't necessarily always be trying to dismiss it or push it away or calm down or bottle it up. I don't know that I have great answers, but I think it's just about transparency and trying to build that community inside the classroom. Part of that is improved by the work they're doing at the Haven or in the community garden because they're getting to know each other in a different way. Then when they come into the regular classroom, there's more of a bond there than there would be otherwise.

SW: What kinds of institutional or program support do you feel like is needed to do this work ethically and effectively? I'm thinking from a labor and logistics perspective about the time and energy involved in this work. I'm cognizant of the reality that teachers have different relationships to and with time and labor. Do you have advice for faculty or graduate students interested in engaging in this collaborative, community-engaged pedagogy, but that might have different limitations or constraints on their time and energy? Or do you have guiding principles that you would encourage teachers to consider before even taking up this work in the classroom?

KS: I mean, it is labor intensive. There's no question about that. I think some places are very good about sort of centralizing their efforts and really providing infrastructure for faculty. UVA is getting there. They've made lots and lots of changes recently that I think are beginning to move us in that direction. But I would say that, yeah, we actually did get a grant from the Jefferson Trust for the first-year writing program to try to expand the infrastructure for community-engaged teaching, which really focused more on training instructors, but it also did provide money for the interns like I'm talking about. It also provided money for students to do research for individual community partners. So if they have a project, like the Haven is starting a community garden, so we have a couple students working on that. One is photographing it, so documenting kind of the progress. Another one's doing research to help figure out design of the garden and those sorts of things.

So there certainly is a need for some financial help to do some of this. But I also think some of it is just about connecting to other faculty that are doing the same thing. That's been really a nice sort of advantage, I guess, of this grant. Because we have been able to build a sense of community within our writing program, among the graduate students and faculty that are doing this kind of work. I think that's one thing that really helps, just having other people to talk to and work through these things with. It definitely helps and gives students leadership positions, too, if you can find ways for them after they've taken the course to kind of help you out as well.

In terms of sort of advice to other faculty and graduate students that want to do this, I think my number one piece of advice would be just to be transparent with your students because this kind

of course never goes as you expect it to. It never goes as planned. I've had semesters where I've completely thrown out a whole writing project that just didn't make sense anymore. I think just being really honest and flexible and checking in with the students a lot. That's actually really hard for a lot of us instructors to do because we're mostly type A personalities. We like control. We like to plan our syllabi and we don't like things to change. So I think that can be really hard, especially for graduate students who maybe don't have as much experience in the classroom, too.

Just being flexible and honest and checking in and not being afraid to change part way through. And thinking about balancing the needs of the students with the community partner. Because a lot of times the student needs don't always match up to what the Haven needs or what Loaves and Fishes needs. I think some of that comes from that relationship again with the partner. I encourage instructors to start there, like don't make up your syllabus and then go show it to the Haven. Instead, go talk to them, think about their input and what they think your students should read and know before they come work there and really try to collaborate on that process.

I also often have, or every semester really, I have the community partner, someone from the community partner come and visit class. And you know, they come as a guest speaker, they're paid an honorarium and they spend time with the students telling them about their experiences, lending their expertise so that it gets more of this collaborative feel, too, I think. Constantly checking in with all the different players in the course. That's where I think both the labor and the joy comes from. I think most of us teachers are in the profession because we love people. So I think this approach to teaching really allows you to find space for those relationships and really nourish those as well.

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