

Episode 10: Megan Von Bergen and Liz Miller

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

From the very beginning, I wanted this podcast to move across institutions and positions. So, I wanted this podcast to highlight and celebrate all of our good work, so hopefully the podcast encourages you, and by you, I mean you specifically, but also I mean a wide range of you. Teachers from everywhere.

In this episode I get the chance to talk with two amazing graduate students. Megan Von Bergen is currently a doctoral student in rhetoric, writing, and linguistics at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Prior to beginning her studies, she taught first year writing and served as de facto WPA for seven years at a small college in the Midwest. Her core research interest include writing pedagogy, religious rhetorics, and digital rhetorics.

I also talk with Liz Miller. Liz is a PhD student in rhetoric, composition and literacy at Ohio State. Her current research delves into care networks among graduate students, particularly focusing on mental health strategies for surviving in a disabling institution. She is also the graduate research associate for the Building Healthcare Collectives Project, an interdisciplinary collaboration that seeks to foster work at the intersections of medicine, rhetoric, and disability studies.

In this episode, Megan and Liz share and talk about their research interests and what informs their teaching, we talk about mental health and disability studies, grading and response practices, and using pedagogies that best support our students and their agency and their writing.

Thank you, Megan and Liz, for joining us.

SW: I'd love to hear about what you all are studying and what you all are researching and writing about, and what really excites you about that work. So, how about we start there, Megan, do you mind talking about your research and interests first?

MVB: I feel like I came to the PhD through the back door. I got my master's degree in literature in 2010. I spent seven years teaching in the Midwest at a tiny college. I was the sole writing faculty there. I had a lot of control over what the writing curriculum turned out looking like.

And, as I designed, and tweaked, and adjusted the writing curriculum and watched how students interacted with the writing curriculum, and actually talked with students, I realized that my interests were shifting towards the writing and rhetoric arm of the English field. That if I wanted to do more in the field, if I wanted to move beyond that small school, then I would need to go out and earn my PhD. And so, I'm here chasing down some of the questions that drove my work at that time.

My experience of teaching for seven years and designing the curriculum has given rise to other interests. I have a lot of interest in how we assess writing, and I am continually experimenting with new ways of writing. I've got a hybridized version of the labor-based grading going on right now.

I find value in positionality and to either affirm, or rework, or perhaps confront that positionality. I find value in research and encouraging students to get out and see what other people have to say about it. I do a lot with multimodal writing as well.

SW: Liz, what about you? What are you interested in? What are you writing about, researching about, and how is that informing your teaching?

LM: I would say that my interests, at least right now, what my research seems to follow, is looking at graduate students, mental health, how we rhetorically navigate the university, different power differentials, together, collectively. I'm still not at the dissertation phase yet, so that's very nebulous, floating around in my brain, but that's one thing that I'm very interested, in terms of my research.

In terms of writing, I'm very interested in ways to make academic writing more personal, or at least ways to incorporate personal experiences, personal stories and voices, into academic theory. And, I still don't know what exactly that will look like for me because there are these expectations in academic writing, so it's really difficult to navigate as a graduate student. But, I do feel like, since I study and write about something like mental health, that it's really hard to not talk about personally. So, we'll see how that all plays out.

Previous to graduate school, or when I was getting my master's, I should say, it was a very literature-heavy program, so I was very focused on literature, and then, happened to discover rhetoric and composition, as well as disability studies, and those really captured my interests, and so, that's what I knew I wanted to study for my PhD, and then, I got to the PhD level and I just realized how stressful it was, how stressed out all my colleagues were, and how difficult a time everybody seemed to be having.

And so, it just seemed like that was the exigence for shifting my focus because that seemed like an intervention that I could make based on something that I knew about firsthand, and it just felt like an important place to try to make changes.

SW: Your research seems like it can really move beyond academic writing, writing scholarship, and the writing classroom. I'm curious as to what initiatives you've seen or have been a part of at your institution that brings more awareness to mental health? Perhaps more specifically initiatives that support graduate students. Maybe others can learn from your experiences and involvement, and it could give them possible ideas, or it could give us possible ideas, to think about and do at our institutions within our programs.

LM: Yeah, absolutely. And, I'm glad that you asked that question. I'm actually part of a grad student-led organization. It's called Graduate Association of Mental Health Action and

Advocacy. And so, we have this organization called GAMHAA, for short, and it's all about supporting fellow graduate students, trying to advocate for graduate students.

So, we talk back to university officials about different policies that we see on campus. We write open letters to officials. We also have a publication called the GAMHAA Ray, where we publish stories by graduate students. They can write editorials, they can write comics. We also provide infographics or data that we think is relevant to graduate students.

So, it's still a new organization, but it's one that I feel like has a lot of potential, and one that I see really trying to make important interventions. I don't know what possibilities there are moving forward, but I would love to see the organization growing. I would love to see conversations happening with other universities to see what other people are doing to support themselves.

SW: So, let's transition back to the writing classroom. Megan, you mentioned labor-based grading as an interest of yours. For those unfamiliar with labor-based grading, it's an alternative assessment practice. This work stems from writing assessment research, in particular, Asao B. Inoue's book, Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom. His work also builds on other grading contract work and models such as Ira Shor, and Jane Danielewicz, and Peter Elbow. I'm interested in your experience with labor-based grading and why you chose to use that approach to assess writing, Megan.

MVB: A big part of my pedagogy as the teacher is I believe that grading should be clear to students. That they shouldn't be looking at my rubrics and trying to guess what's in my mind, or please the teacher, so to speak. And, I appreciate the way the overall framework minimizes as much of that guesswork as possible.

To look back at my rubric even, and say, "Does this do it super-well or just well? How do I feel about where to place it on the rubric?" And so, taking out as much of that language as I can, is not only good for the students, it's better for me.

I'm about a week into it. The students seem chill. I am liking this super-straightforward way of approaching the grades, not having to teach them how to calculate their percentages, or how to calculate their point-based grading. I'm hoping it actually gives them agency, in that it makes the grading systems super-clear, and so they know what they need to do to reach the grade they want to.

SW: Liz, I'm also interested in your pedagogical practices. Given your focus and interest in disability studies and mental health, do you mind sharing how you embrace accessible practices and pedagogies in your writing classroom, and what that looks like?

LM: So, I guess thinking about how you get started or how I like to get started in thinking about making a class accessible is, we talk a lot about how the syllabus is constructed. I've put my disability statement, my accessibility statement, at the very front of the syllabus, and I acknowledge to students many times that we all have different learning experiences and expectations. We all learn differently. We all communicate differently.

So, I'm very open to changing something if it's not working. I'm very open to working individually with students. If an assignment is unclear or if something actually would work better for them, I try to incorporate as much student choice as possible. And, I also acknowledge that a lot of our university classrooms are just really uncomfortable spaces to be in.

So, I make it clear that students are allowed to walk around, they can leave, they can eat, whatever is helping to make them more comfortable in the space that we're sharing, because I know, at least at OSU, our first-year writing classrooms are so tiny. And then, there's these little tiny desks all crammed in together. So, there's literally no room for anybody. It almost seems like some sort of fire hazard, but I know it's not. It just seems so uncomfortable and everyone has a bit of a miserable time while that's happening. But, I think that acknowledging that, and trying to be committed to helping each other feel comfortable goes a long way.

And then, we also do talk about disability, it's important to name disability when you're talking about access and you're talking about these issues, and there's not always a lot of space in first year composition to talk extensively about disability theory or disability rhetorics. But, I think it is a good conversation to have, at least getting students thinking about these things because I don't know where else they would be encountering it. And, disability studies is so important to me, and it's something that I think more people should know about and care about. So, I try to be at least that one person that's bringing that issue to their minds.

I see a lot of stress in my students, a lot of depression and anxiety, and that's something that they are very interested in because I've noticed, in their projects, I allow them to choose what they want to explore and research, and a lot of them choose to write about mental health and mental illness, so I know that's something they're preoccupied with.

It just feels very important to me to make space for that, to make space to talk about it, to explore. I'll bring artifacts into class that specifically have to do with mental health. They will too. It's something that they seem very invested in talking about and writing about, and that just seems very meaningful to me to make space for that, and it's something that I'm trying to make more space for because I'm noticing just how many of them want to talk about it, and I really want to honor that because it does really seem like, here in 2019, this is a huge problem that young college-aged, and not even just college-aged, people are facing.

SW: Megan, I know you've written about one-on-one conferences, and I feel like teacher-student conferences are a great opportunity or space to really listen to students, potentially opening up more possibilities and opportunities to talk about disability and accessibility. You actually talk about accessibility in "Meaningful Learning through One-on-One Conferences." Do you mind sharing how you facilitate one-on-one conferences, and how you use that space to support student learning and writing and invite more intimate, intentional conversations?

MVB: Yeah, absolutely. I love one-on-one conferences. The best part of what I do is the teaching, and the best part of the teaching is the students. And so, of course I want to talk to them and get to know them as people.

Back when I was faculty, I had my own office. I had my own space where I could meet with students and we could go over their papers, we could talk about other things on their mind, and so, I started using the conferences as a way to work with students on stuff that was hard to get to in class.

As a graduate student, our program here asks for us to meet. We're asked me twice with our students during the course of the semester. I'm tweaking when I'm meeting with the students. Earlier, when I started teaching here last fall, I kept at least one of those conferences very early in the semester to go over their papers. I'm pushing them both now towards the end of the term.

So, we'll go over their research paper was, which is their third assignment, just to answer any generic questions they may have. Summer sessions are five weeks. In a longer term, I would meet and help them organize that third paper to get it out of the five-paragraph structure.

I've moved to the other conference though, and this is a pedagogical decision, to the multimodal assignment, and I will meet with them after their multimodal assignment is drafted to ask them questions about how they're putting it together, how they're designing it for their audience, and their purpose, and their plan to circulation.

Based on some of the work I've done over the last year, effective multimodal writing really depends on that conference, and so, I've pushed our meeting.

I'm making other changes, especially to the conferences. One thing that I have kept is, in addition to the academically oriented conferences, I meet one-on-one with my students early in the semester in a 16-week course. I'll meet one-on-one with my students to try to get to know them. Those meetings are usually spread out over about two weeks, but I'll meet with the students, from 15 to 20 minutes.

To fit that in in my five-week term, I'm meeting with students for about 10 minutes and sometimes two at once, especially if the students know each other outside of my class, and so, I'll meet with two people who are friends and get to know them both together, which the students are in a learning community, they often do know each other. It works real well.

But, getting to know the students as people is important to me. It means that I have a sense of who they are. I have a sense of how to design writing for them. It helps us develop a relationship that is about more than just... They're more than brains on a stick, which I think makes me a better teacher and a better person in the classroom, and allows me to celebrate what they do well.

I had a student yesterday show me some absolutely fantastic drawings, and a student today show me some tables he builds. They're beautiful. I'm in awe of what my students do.

SW: I feel like this conversation gives us a lot to think about, in terms of what we do in the writing classroom and even within our writing programs. How can we better support students? How can we listen to them more? How do we embrace accessible pedagogies and accessible teaching practices? How do we talk more intentionally about disability studies? What do we do, in terms of building a network of support for our graduate students?

So, there's a lot of ideas and thoughts that can be cultivated and fostered within the classroom and outside the classroom through this conversation. So, thank you so much, again, Megan and Liz, and thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.