

Episode 47: Melvin Beavers

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Melvin Beavers about writing program administration, his research on online writing instruction and professionalizing part-time faculty to teach online, principles to online pedagogy, and he shares advice for those interested in WPA work.

I actually got an email from Melvin back in August. He emailed and just said he really enjoyed the podcast, he said he uses the podcast in his composition theory course, and he recommended a guest speaker to come on and chat. That email correspondence started what I would now call a friendship. Melvin invited me to be a guest in his composition theory class at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and it was such an incredible time meeting and interacting and talking with his students. So I'm really thankful for Melvin and that email back in August.

Melvin Beavers is the First-Year Writing Director in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. His research interests involve writing program administration, composition pedagogy, rhetoric, and popular culture studies. He teaches first-year writing and a variety of upper-level courses, that include composition theory, online writing instruction, persuasive writing, and research methods. Additionally, he has presented research at several national conferences, including conferences for the Council of Writing Program Administrators and the Association of Rhetoric and Writing Studies.

Melvin, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You recently became the First Year Writing Director at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. How did you get into writing program administration?

MB: Well, thank you for having me. This is an exciting opportunity and I really appreciate the opportunity to be here and talk a little bit with you about what I do. So, in the spring, in 2020, I stepped into the role as the first-year writing director, the WPA. And for the most part, I felt pretty comfortable. I have worked at UALR since 2006, first as a part-time faculty member once I graduated with my master's in rhet/comp, and then I worked part-time and on and off did a couple of different jobs in between. I worked as a personal trainer for a while, in addition to working part-time at the university, and I did some professional writing for some other different kinds of organizations. But I knew that my passion and what I wanted to do was work with writers and work with student writers.

And so, I always stay connected to the institution. Part of what's kept me there was this, this is an additional source of income and I like to teach part-time, and I always had faculty... the former writing program administrator, Huey Crisp, provided opportunities for me to go to different kinds of conferences. I remember going to the Popular Culture conference several years in a row,

and there was always some support there. And then when Dr. Sherry Robertson came on, she made sure that I had access to other kinds of professional development. And so, I always had a lot of interaction with the WPA.

And so, I started to learn and know more about what that role was like, and really got a glimpse of what these two really, from my perspective, mentors, were able to do. And so, when our former WPA decided to step down, it just seemed like the natural fit for me to step into this role. And so, the faculty voted and I was voted into the position in spring of 2020. When I stepped into the role, I felt like I knew people in the program pretty well, and I say “people,” obviously, my full-time faculty and the part-time faculty. And so, I wasn't really apprehensive about developing relationships and running the program from the idea of managing faculty, but thinking about the program as a whole and the type of students that we serve and the student population, and really trying to decide and figure out what do I want to do? Where do I want to take this program?

And so, for the most part, I just thought, you know what, let me just sit back and get a lay of the land. Let me figure out what some of the processes are, what our retention rates are for our courses. Obviously, the outcomes for the course, the WPA outcomes – that's what our programmatic outcomes are, that's what we follow – but just really trying to figure out what do I want to do in this program? What does this program need me to do? And so, both short-term and long-term. And so for me, part of what I decided was, I want to fall back on some of the things that are opportunities that I was given in terms of professional development and really thinking about some of what my part-time faculty needed.

I had to think, “Okay, well now we've really got to shift who needs help moving online,” in terms of the faculty. In what way will I provide that help to them? It's really just fell into line, or fell into scene. I was able to put together a workshop, which is something that I wanted to do. I wanted to provide a workshop for faculty to come to and talk about not only what the best practices are in online writing instruction, but just found out what people know and what they don't know and what some of the challenges might be for them, and I put together a really quick workshop. I invited full-time faculty, part-time faculty. That was very challenging. What I've learned from that is as a writing program administrator, we really have to think through the kinds of professional development we'll want to offer and really think about individual need.

SW: So one of your main goals as WPA was to support part-time faculty and think more intentionally about professional development and individual needs of instructors. Your research focuses on preparing and professionalizing part-time contingent faculty to teach writing online. Can you talk more about that research and how you help develop part-time faculty as the WPA?

MB: Part of why I focused a lot of my research on part-time faculty is because I was one for so long. So, I was trying to marry my experience and my research interests together. And so, they came together within part-time faculty interests, concerns, issues with OWI training, and teacher preparation. Some of the approaches that I think are helpful and useful really come out of my

dissertation research. And so, part of what I like to do, or like to think of as training is the idea of being in the moment. So when I say that, I think of things like, when we were on campus, I had an open door policy. So, if someone comes in my office and they want to just talk about their course syllabus, or they want to talk about an idea for an assignment, and it could connect to OWI, it may not, but if it does, that's an opportunity for me to talk them through their idea.

What do you want to do? What's the purpose of this? How are you going to present this information? What kind of language are you going to use to talk to your students and how is that different from how you might do something in the face-to-face setting? Or talk to them about accessibility issues, making sure that students have access to the materials or giving them materials in multiple ways, whether that's an audio recording, PDF file, or a recording of instructions, in addition to giving them a hard copy that they can read and just being able to, really on the fly, give somebody information or help them think through something. So that's one way of approaching it.

Another way is providing all kinds of resources. A lot of information in the OWI realm is...you've got your OWI community information. So, that information is readily accessible and I try to make sure that folks know about what's going on with the OWI community, and if they want to participate in a workshop, or if they want to have access to a new book that's out, I make sure that they have those materials and that if they have questions about it, then we can perhaps have a conversation. So, ultimately what I try to do is make myself available if faculty want to have those conversations or share ideas.

SW: In your teaching experiences and research on online writing instruction, is there a core principle that stands out to you, maybe more so than others, or one you emphasize more in your program as imperative to teaching writing online effectively?

MB: Yeah, so, you have the OWI principles of effective practices and that's an exhaustive laundry list of, honestly, check marks. It's like, am I engaged in my course? Have I made it accessible? And so, I make sure that I'm doing things to develop the personal and interact with my students. And this is really interesting that you asked me this question today, because I actually was thinking through the idea of engagement with students and increasing your presence and your interaction with your students.

Sometimes, it's in terms to answer your question about what gets overlooked, I think that...I want to say we, but I'm just going to say, I don't really want to speak for the entire community, but I want to say that sometimes it seems that the push toward making sure that all these boxes are checked, I wonder if we're missing something in terms of just realizing that we're teaching something. So I think about, I think it's a Marshall Gregory's article, I want to say it's called "Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Teacherly Ethos," and part of that is thinking through what we are teaching, and how we're conveying that information and not necessarily thinking about what we're doing as the banking concept of pouring information into brains, but really thinking about

how am I developing the course, but how am I making sure that my students are learning and I'm actually teaching them something?

Because I think sometimes, we get so involved in the design, and in the ideas about engagement and presence and rapport and interaction, and I think those are good. I think those are strong points to put on that checklist, but I guess more of what I'm saying is those organic teacherly moments and that teacherly ethos that you want to develop with your students, and remembering that our charge is to make sure that our students learn and to really coach our students through, whether it's writing or whatever the discipline may be, and sometimes I think maybe we take a step back and we just look at what we're doing inside the course, and even though we're singing about the, make sure you've done X, you've done Y, you've got Z, it's like, but let's not forget that we are...especially in rhet/comp programs, the teaching focus is really there. And that's one of the things I really try to emphasize with my graduate students is, think about who you are as a teacher, how do you see yourself in that role or within this online space?

SW: Teaching writing online requires intentional and purposeful techniques that complement pedagogical values, and that complement learning outcomes and goals. You were talking about how you encourage instructors to focus on engagement and learning. Something that's really important is staying attuned to the value of teaching writing organically even if teachers are using technologies, right?

MB: No, I agree one hundred percent. I think that some of my most memorable experiences with students have been in those moments where the classroom has really come alive as a result of a discussion or a student sharing a piece of variety and it sparks conversation or it sparks ideas, or it sparks more writing. It's always some of that invention work that goes into the writing process, or that is a part of the writing process, that we see our students growing. And so, I don't want to come across as seeming like I'm saying a lot of the principles and effective practices are prescriptive. I don't think they are. I think they're just like guidelines. They're important guidelines. They do help with the management and the running and the success of the course. Absolutely, and I definitely want to make sure my instructors understand how to apply those outcomes and think about the outcomes as here is a goal. What can we do to make sure we get to that goal? What kind of practices or things can we do in the classroom that enable us to meet this outcome?

But I still think sometimes, and this can happen within any teaching environment that we remember what teaching is and how we want to really develop our students and never let them forget that, and especially in a first year course, this idea of what is it that they want their writing to make? What is it that they want their writing to say? And the benefit of the online writing classroom, I think is that we do get students more involved in writing because that's one of the main forms of communication.

And so, the more our students are writing, that's always a plus, that's always a good thing. And the push toward, for me, I guess to come back to my research, the main push for me, and the goal

was really to better understand how WPAs were approaching this idea of developing part-time faculty, because for many that may not necessarily be something that's on the radar. Developing graduate students and TAs, that most certainly is, but if you're in that institution where a majority of your first-year writing instructors are working in a part-time capacity, I might imagine that that becomes something that's more important to you, especially now with a lot of online, remote learning, taking place.

Then again, that also gets into upper level administration seeing some value in that, and providing funding for you to host trainings or do workshops, and then creating ways for you to support those faculty coming to that, as opposed to just these open-ended come as you can kinds of things, which I think are fine, but again, that not only increases the WPAs workload, it also could potentially increase the part-time faculty's workload if they're having to make time to come do these things. And so, there are work arounds.

For example, I just had a workshop with Shelley Rodrigo as a pre-semester workshop, and she did a wonderful presentation for my faculty, and many of them were not able to attend, but it was recorded, so they were able to have access to it if they wanted it in that way. So again, there are things we can do to still continue to give access to our part-time faculty.

SW: What advice would you give to someone interested in WPA work, and is there a thread in conversations you've had with other WPAs that you'd pass along to incoming and/or even established WPAs?

MB: Well, honestly, and this is probably advice that I would give to a new WPA is, really network, talk to people, meet people in the field. I would try to connect them to people in the field, really get a community of people that you can talk to because that'll help you when you have moments of panic perhaps, and you can go and whoever that person is, or those people are that you know, that have done this, you can seek them out for counsel, and the WPA listserv helps a lot, too, in terms of supporting, I think new WPAs with just lots of resources.

I think for any WPA, but especially for those that have a really strong interest or want to really develop part-time faculty, I would offer them three ways of thinking through what they want to do. So I would say, you definitely want to have awareness. Think in terms of who are your people? What are their levels of experience? How long have they been teaching for you? It's not a one size fits all model. You may have a lot of people that have taught for you for a long, long time, and they may not need as much support from you, and if you have those, bring them on board and try to get them to help you do things. So for example, a local perspective, issues and whatnot, we do have a lot of faculty that have worked for us for a long time. And so, I think their voices are just as important as our full-time faculty and they deserve just as much a seat at the table as the rest of us have.

I ask several part-time faculty, do you want to come to one of my classes and talk to my students about what you do in your class or do you want to help me with this workshop that I'm thinking

about putting together? Or what do you think about this particular topic or issue? So, a lot of times I think there's a hierarchy of who gets to say or who gets to speak. And I think that our part-time faculty have just as much to bring to the table and some of them...and knowledge and experience that they want to share that we can benefit from. So I would say, be aware of who your people are and what they have to offer.

And really, I would say if you're coming into a program that has a strong sense of community, what can you do to build on that? And then really, I think this goes for all of us, have some foresight. Think about what's coming next. What can we see that's coming down the line for first year writing that we think will impact our faculty and our students, and how can we create opportunities that get ahead of the game as opposed to trying to play catch up? Honestly, I think what I'm really saying is vision. It's like, what vision do you want to have for your program? And how can you maximize the talent that you have and how can you reach out and find other talent that can come to your program? Because ultimately what we're trying to do is make, create great opportunities for our faculty, but ultimately, what we're trying to do is think about our students.

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