

Episode 46: J. Michael Rifenburg

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode I talk with J. Michael Rifenburg about writing classes and athletic programs, how writing teachers can develop more ethical, inclusive teaching practices that keep in mind student-athletes, and his more recent work on cadet writing.

J. Michael Rifenburg, associate professor of English at the University of North Georgia, USA, serves as co-director of first-year composition and senior faculty fellow for scholarly writing with UNG's Center for Teaching, Learning, and Leadership. He authored *The Embodied Playbook: Writing Practices of Student-Athletes* (Utah State University Press, 2018) and co-edited *Contemporary Perspectives on Cognition and Writing* (WAC Clearinghouse, 2017). His next book, *Drilled to Write: A Longitudinal Study of a Cadet at a Senior Military College*, is currently under contract.

Michael, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: In your book, *The Embodied Playbook: Writing Practices of Student Athletes*, you talk about how writing teachers can come to more nuanced understandings of literacy by thinking more carefully and intentionally about athletic programs. You spend a year analyzing the men's basketball team at the University of North Georgia. Can you talk about your initial assumptions before studying the team, and then what you discovered about reading and writing practices along the way?*

JMR: Sure. So based on the work I did in Oklahoma with the football team, based on the work I did with Auburn with the football team and the women's volleyball team, I expected that when I hung out with the men's basketball team at my school, a small Division II school with about a \$6 million athletic budget, I expected a lot of physical text circulating. I expected a lot of papers. I expected a lot of whiteboards. I expected a lot of iPads. I expected a lot of writing instruments, pins, pencils, stylists, fingers. I expected a physical playbook or a digital playbook. I just expected all their traditional signs of literacy and writing and reading. None of that was there. So now we're transitioning to what did I find. What I found that I'm still chewing on and I try to answer in my book is a lot of literate practices, which I expected a lot of literate practices, but these are existing without physical text.

I found the enactment of written text, of plays, but I found that enactment of written text through the body, being there without having a physical text referred to. So players and coaches learning text without text. And I gotta put this caveat here: I'm working with a pretty common narrow definition of text as like a paper or a screen. But that wasn't there. Coaches and players were

making up new plays on the practice court together. They were giving new names to plays on the practice court together without writing anything down. They would just move their bodies around the court. The coach would blow the whistle, say, "Pause, let's stop, let's do a new play. Let's call it Zip Three. And I want you to do this to each other." He moved them around in coordination with each other and in coordination to the out of bounds line on the basketball court, the three-point line of the basketball court. So what I found is the rapid fluidity, creation, circulation of texts with bodies in spaces and spoken language, but without writing, without paper, without screens.

SW: So you're talking about embodiment and how student-athletes move on a basketball court, for example. The fluidity of bodies and spaces, and how this performance so-to-speak moves beyond the textual and alphabetic. So it seems like there's something to be said here about the importance of orality, collaboration, group dynamics, and teamwork, and sort of the value in things developing organically?

JMR: Yeah, and we're getting, we're getting a little deeper into sports here which I love to do, but maybe listeners aren't as interested in sports. But we often see football as more tightly scripted as coaches having a stronger hand on what play they're going to run. And when that play breaks down and an athlete does something that wasn't in the play, the fans love it, ESPN loves it, but it drives the coaches crazy. They want strict order and they want to know exactly what's going to happen on this given football play. Basketball play works with a lot more improvisation, improv. I actually drew from jazz, jazz improvisation to make sense of what basketball is doing in one of my chapters. So they give a general idea of here's what we kind of want to do; we want to look for a three point shot; we want to look to get the ball down low. But beyond that, it's a lot more improvisation. And because of that, we see a lot more collaboration between all bodies on the court making a play. Yeah, and so that was fascinating to me that the text was kind of put to the side, and instead, bodies and spaces are working together to create meaning

SW: I think we can take this back to the writing classroom, though. How are we improvising as teachers? How are we inviting students to collaborate on our written texts or assignments or assessments? How are we creating lesson plans that are flexible? Those are some questions we can consider based on your observations. I want to talk about what it means to consider the student-athletes in our writing classes. What are our ethical responsibilities as writing teachers in considering the time commitments, constraints, and the obligations student-athletes have outside our writing classes? How do we be more inclusive in our teaching practices and assessments toward student-athletes?

JMR: So I have some answers. I don't have an answer. I'm going to offer some answers that kind of rub against each other and that might be a common theme of you asking a really good question and me giving somewhat contradictory answers, because this is tough. This is challenging. And even though I have a book out there, I'm still thinking through this, and that's why I love this kind of work. So an answer is our student athletes are remarkably busy. In a way, they – and I feel like I can speak relatively broadly about student athletes based on working at

multiple schools and multiple sports – in a way, they remind me of my time as a grad student: being everything to everyone, being overworked, being underpaid, being cycled through a system with rapid waves of paperwork. You know, drowning in paperwork and checking the boxes.

So they got weightlifting in the morning. I didn't have weightlifting in the morning, now we're talking about how they are different. Weightlifting in the morning. Class in the mid-morning. They got lunch and film sessions. They got afternoon practice. They got mandatory study hours. They got to breathe and have fun. Then lights are out. And then repeat again. If they're in season, that schedule's a little more complex and a little more demanding. If they're out of season, a little less so. And if you have a scholarship, which is rare, the stress of keeping it for the next academic year. Scholarships are not guaranteed. They're a one-year commitment. If you don't have a scholarship, the added stress of trying to get one by maybe practicing harder, lifting more weights, running more miles, or just working to get food on the table. So incredibly busy, right?

So when I ask a student athlete, who's in season to say, “Hey, come to my office hours on Tuesday, let's talk about your English 11001 paper.” Can they really do that? Do they have time? Do they have the comfort level of telling, you know, big, important head coach, “I can't come because I need to go see Dr. Rifenburg to talk about transitions for my English 1101 paper.” How is a first-year student athlete going to say that to, you know, a big, important head football coach. So flexibility, kindness, openness, me trying to find new ways to help student athletes grow as writers that might not require them to come in person to my office, make a mandatory trip to the writing center. So that's one answer.

And now I'll talk back to myself. The picture that I gave right there is a picture we give for a lot of our students. Most of our students. Busy. Overwhelmed. Right? So I hope that any ethical responsibility or kindness or flexibility that I show to student athletes is the same we show to all of our students that we work with each quarter, each semester, each year. Just developing a better awareness of their challenges in life. Let me follow up. You asked, I think a harder question and one I can kind of talk a little bit about inclusive assessment and practices. I don't want that to go unnoticed, even though I don't have an answer. So here's some things that are running through my head. Like many people in writing studies, I'm inspired by the work of Asao Inoue. Him thinking about labor-based assessment practices. I've had a chance to read his books. I've had a chance to bring him to campus to talk to my colleagues. I drank some wine with him. I had some kind of bad Italian food with him, so I kind of know his stuff. And I'm beginning to understand this pivot toward labor, but here's a pause I have. And I wonder about that term “labor.” And I wonder about that in terms of college athletics, a space that's already critiqued by economic professors as essentially “economically chaotic.” That's my official term.

Coaches with huge salaries, players not making anything, TV contracts, and a billion student athletes scraping by. There's a labor exploitation in college sports. So I wonder, I haven't written about this, so I don't know what I think because I haven't written yet. So I wonder about emphasizing “labor” in a curricular space where the student athletes are coming from an

extracurricular space where their labor is exploited for profit. I haven't thought about that deeply. My book wasn't about assessment. Wasn't about these classroom practices. I wanted to paint a rich portion of literacy in the moment, but I think there's something to be thought about with labor and our student athletes. But I think there are some areas to pause and do some more thinking.

SW: You're problematizing labor and calling us to pay attention to how labor is exploited, especially in connection with student-athletes. You mention the complex relationship between athletics and academics in your book. There's another conversation that's complex, some of which you just brought up, and that's issues concerning the NCAA and student-athletes: marketing, advertising, profiting off of student-athletes and their images. You have decades of experience around athletic programs, and you also know the demands of teaching writing and rhetoric. So you have this two-fold perspective of the expectations in athletic programs, or the expectations athletic programs ask of students, and the expectations we ask of students in our writing classes. Usually there seems to be this tension, this complex relationship between academics and athletics, students and athletes.

JMR: You're right, and I think some of the more interesting work that we can do is look at the history of where these relationships came from. So here's where we are now, how can we trace this back to find out how we got to where we got to? And I've had unique experiences where I took a class with the Athletics Director at Oklahoma. I had a chance to interview for my book, became close to him and learned a lot from him. I had the chance to have some conversation with the NCAA President at the same time as I'm doing some close work with the student athletes at three different universities. So I have a wide variety of experiences, but I also want to go back historically. All the way back to our good friends the Greeks. So just getting a historical perspective of the relationship with athletics and academics, and I want to bracket this by saying, this is a Western tradition. So this is the dominant Western educational tradition of academics and athletics.

There's, you know, the dude Isocrates hanging out around the same time as Plato and such. He writes a wonderful book, *Antidosis*. Here he starts talking about liberal education. He starts talking about the pairing of the mind and the body. He starts talking about the twin arts of philosophy, is the term he uses, and gymnastics. So they're coming together. Debra Hawhee does a much better job than I do in her book about the Greek tradition of athletics and academics. And we can think about another education historian guy named H.I. Marrou. He's writing in French, but he has a book called *A History of Education in Antiquity*. He describes the Romans taking over Greek education and adopting most of it, but getting rid of music and gymnastics. Pretty much the same things public schools drop today, right? Music or sports. So we had at one point that fusion of athletics and academics, but that bifurcation is getting stronger as we're moving forward.

We can think about the rise of the U.S. university around the turn of the 20th century. And there's some great historians of Higher Ed, like Frederick Rudolph, like John Thelin. They started

pointing to the growing interest in college athletics at the same time while faculty and administrators, me and you, have no interest in sports. We see that as what students do on their free time for fun, and we'll let them do what they want to do. That's not bothering us. But sports started growing in popularity and income. Students were no longer in charge of the football team. They brought in outside people to be in charge of the football team, and suddenly we have people like Amos Alonzo Stagg at the University of Chicago back in the 1890s. Has a tenure faculty position, has an administrative appointment as Athletic Director, has a separate budget exempted from external review, a direct line to the president, big salary, and he's all on his own running sports.

So once sports gets so powerful and has so much money, now faculty want to have a say, now administrators want to have a say, now we're saying, "Oh, things are out of control," when we've kind of seen that happening for a while. And so, yeah, there's this challenging relationship that we still haven't worked through.

Two quick fun stories. These are two my favorite stories. I think they ended up as footnotes in my book because I never figured out how to get them in there. But the thing about athletics and academics colliding: Princeton, their football field, I think it was either 1889 or 1890. Woodrow Wilson, soon to become president, soon to lead us into World War I. He's a professor there. He'll be president of Princeton in a couple of years, but he's in love with football football. And he's on the football field and the captain of Princeton's team at the time was somebody named Edgar Allen Poe, grandnephew of the poet. Firsthand accounts have Woodrow Wilson hitting Poe with a stick, trying to get him to go faster down a football field. I don't know why, I just love the idea of Woodrow Wilson hitting Edgar Allen Poe on the football field with a stick, encouraging him to go faster.

I'll end with this narrative. I was at Cs in St. Louis, five, six, seven years ago. At the same time we were in St. Louis for Cs, the men's basketball tournament, the annual March tournament was there. And I was in a hotel. I got in the elevator, it was going down, it stopped at a floor, the door opened, and in walks Mark Emmert, who is president of the NCAA. Used to be President of Washington. Used to be Chancellor at LSU. But he opens the elevator, he gets in, shuts the door. And I'm so far into my research. I'm writing a scathing report of the NCAA. I think they're doing a horrible job. And here he is in the elevator with me. I literally have an elevator pitch for Mark Emmert and I was going to give him the business and tell him why everything's so wrong. I shook his hand and I told him he was doing an amazing job, and then I left.

I did pitch my dissertation to Mark Emmert, but I never got to give him a piece of my mind. I just kind of fawned over him. He ended up actually talking at Cs. That was super exciting. Marty Townsend, who used to be at Missouri, but has since retired. She invited him to Cs. She just sent him an email. And since the men's tournament was at the same time, and he was going to be there for the men's tournament, he came and he actually talked at a panel at Cs. And I remember Irwin Weiser at Purdue stood up and asked him a tough question. But yeah, so the president of NCAA has actually spoken at Cs.

SW: The through line in your work is students. You care deeply about students, and you're interested in the range of students in the writing classroom, and more broadly, the university at large. You're interested in the different contexts and lived experiences of students and how they approach and perceive writing. Your more recent research focuses on cadet writing. Writing done inside military bases and headquarters. What led you to this work?

JMR: Just like I'm not sure what I think about the NCAA, and having a \$100 million dollar athletic budget at Oklahoma, at Ohio State, paying coaches \$5 million dollars, I don't know what I think about that. And I don't know what I think about the military in the civilian input in the military and me as a civilian professor training future army officers or preparing them for a life in the army. I don't know what I think about that. So I think I'm brought to these areas because I don't know what I think. And that just makes me want to learn more. I'm also drawn to them because, as you mentioned, I have a deep commitment to students. I have a deep commitment to anybody who likes writing, so I have a deep commitment to people. So I'm fascinated by the work our students are doing in almost these para-curricular spaces, like athletics. It's not completely extracurricular.

ROTC, it's not completely extracurricular, but it's working alongside our academic spaces and they have clear understandings of texts and what texts do and how texts will operate within their community of practice. Also, these spaces are spaces that I'm kind of an outsider of. I really don't want to do the ethnography thing of being a white, tenured, middle-class professor and say, "Hey, here's the cool thing going on." I'm very careful to try not to do that. But I want to study a space that's unique and different for me. I want to try to find my way through it and try to find a way to get a part of it as much as I can. I'm not talking about access but trying to learn about what's going on in these very unique spaces. Yeah, so I think broadly I'm interested in the writing our students do in these unique spaces and what that might mean for broader curricular writing

SW: Could you talk more about how studying and observing these different communities, student-athletes and ROTC, and their meaning making and composing practices, have helped inform your own understanding of reading and writing, and your approach to teaching?

JMR: Sure. I have a kind of a different response. When I started this research over a decade ago, I wasn't trying to draw a clear line between the football field and an 1101 first-year composition classroom. That they're doing "X" on the football field, therefore, we should do "Y" in English 1101. I wanted to study writing for writing sake and you get a rich picture of some really cool literate practices in their environments. So I've been a little hesitant to draw clear applications to say, "Here's what it means for teaching thesis statements," for example.

But also, as you mentioned, these are all lives. I can't say Michael Rifenburg the researcher is different than Michael Rifenburg the teacher, and Michael Rifenburg the father is different than Michael Rifenburg the son, you know. This is my literal life, so these areas overlap here and

infuse together. All I can really say here is a selfish answer. Ideally, research should be mutually beneficial.

And that the work that I did with the basketball team should have helped the student athletes there just as much as it helped me get my promotion and tenure. They were working together to build knowledge. But again, a selfish answer. This work has just simply strengthened my commitment to language, to writing, to reading, to working on language with others. I'm getting more into almost like the Framework for Success in Post-Secondary Writing, the Habits of Mind, more so than clear application. But this work has just deepened my awareness of mysteries of language, of reading and writing that we don't know always what's going on or why. That we are all inextricably tied up in languaging with others and using language to make sense of who we are, what we are, where we are. How I take these lofty, almost spiritual beliefs about language in the classroom? I don't have a direct answer. It isn't necessarily making a better PowerPoint presentation on thesis statements or creating a more effective assignment with principles of teaching and learning. As important as that stuff is, I think at the end, my research has informed my teaching by just deepening the mystery of writing for me and deepening my love of puzzling through the mystery of writing for other people.

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