

Episode 133: Naomi Simmons-Thorne

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Naomi Simmons-Thorne talks about social justice movements, critical pedagogy, bell hooks, Midlands Technical College, and educational equity.

Naomi Simmons-Thorne is a graduate student and English teacher based at the University of South Carolina. Her research areas include educational foundations, critical pedagogy, teacher instruction, and rhetoric and composition. Naomi has been awarded several prestigious fellowships at institutions, including the Department of Education-funded Research Institute for Scholars of Equity, located at North Carolina Central University, the Southern Education Foundation, and Rutgers University. Naomi has taught in several South Carolina public school districts, including the South Carolina Public Charter School District, Richland School District Two, and Lexington Richland School District five. She has worked as an English teacher, literacy interventionist, and college writing tutor. In 2021, Naomi became the inaugural recipient of the Cheryl A. Wall Graduate Student Paper Prize in Black Women's Studies. Her articles have appeared in publications including *Teaching Sociology* and *Education Week*. Naomi is also working toward the completion of her first two books, *Currents in Black Feminist Thought* and *The Ontological Problem: Black Racial Ontology and the Politics of Sexual Difference*.

Naomi, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: How about we start with your story? You're getting your Masters of Teaching in English Education at the University of South Carolina. How did you get interested in teaching?

NST: There's a concept called external classrooms or outside classrooms. I got my starting education in an outside classroom, and my outside classroom was the Black Lives Matter movement and in social justice movement building. As an activist and an organizer, it became really incumbent on me, the imperative of education and the way that education inhabited us with consciousness and made us more predisposed to certain ideologies and ways of seeing the world and supporting certain struggles over others. I came to see education as a huge battleground for the struggle of consciousness and ideology very early on. I did not get my formal start in education until a little bit later. Going into my senior year of undergrad, I was accepted for a fellowship at North Carolina Central University, and that fellowship was at Education Research Institute. At Research Institute, I began working under senior scholars and doing work on the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and studying education within that institutional context. Learning more about the students, learning more about the educational inequalities that they were subjected to and just the impact of incarceration on youth literacy and on youth education, those things made me really passionate about education.

I knew that education was something that I wanted to get involved with, both on the teaching side and on the research side as well. Lots of times people go into education research without having a background in the classroom, and I didn't want to be that person, so I decided to get

into the classroom. And when I got there, I loved what I was doing. That's how I got into the English classroom and also the teaching of writing.

SW: How would you describe your approach to teaching writing, and what assignments do you bring into the classroom?

NST: I might have hinted at this by my analysis of education and in the classroom, but I'm obviously very tied to the pedagogy of critical pedagogy and critical pedagogy approaches. For me, I absolutely see my role in the classroom and as a writing teacher, as helping my students connect their lives to the larger structures around them, the structures that bring them into the classrooms, the structures that mandate that we teach certain things instead of others. In my classroom, I definitely try to get my students to think about these larger topics, the politics that surround education and their daily lives. I use writing as both the conduit to understand and also the conduit to change those politics around that. What's really important to me is always giving students an opportunity to write about and write from their personal experiences.

I have taught writing at the community college level and also in charter schools as well. What I've found that worked best for my students definitely has been all writing that connects to your daily life. Of course, there are writing assignments that require research. They're writing assignments that we do that's based on text and literature. But my best writing assignments are always the ones that get students to think about their own personal lives and experiences. When students are coming into first year English especially, their lived experience is their biggest source of knowledge. Everything that they learn subsequent to that will be a contribution in addition to that. But when a student comes into first year English, their daily life, their daily experiences is where their source of knowledge is. And so building up a writer in addition to building up a student's capacity for critical thought also requires building on that source of knowledge and starting from there. I love assignments where I get students to talk about their religious backgrounds. How were you raised religiously? What were your experiences like in the classroom before you got to college? Those kinds of assignments, really getting students to think about those things.

SW: Your teaching has been influenced a lot by bell hooks, and I was hoping to give you space to talk about her legacy and impact on literacy education and writing studies.

NST: Yeah, absolutely, and thank you for that space to talk about hooks contributions to the field of rhetoric and composition. There's so many things to start with, but I think what I'll start with is my students. For anyone who teaches first-year English first- or second-year English, we are given these kinds of compilation anthology textbooks, and we assign students readings from them and writing assignments as well. Although I knew bell hooks from my classes in Women and Gender studies, when I came into first-year English, I began to see bell hooks' writings a lot in these anthology books. When I would see these chapters that would be included with her works in them, I'd be really inclined to assign them to students. I began assigning these works to students that I'd find in these anthology books, and I began to see how much my students respond to them.

I'm thinking about a couple of her essays relating to class. There are some works that I found in these anthologies, from her book *Class Matters*, some of her writings from teaching and some of her writing on feminist theory more broadly. bell hooks has a way of making high theory and high thought very accessible to students, and also incorporating her lived experience into her writing, and also always keeping a class dimension in whatever her analysis is. For me, in a two-year school, in a charter school context, all those components are really important. The notion of class, the notion of experience, all these are important. I found that these texts have really resonated with them. She lives in my classroom through assignments and pedagogy, but she also has an influence on me just as an educator myself.

Of course, her book *Teaching to Transgress* is of pedagogical knowledge and foundations for me. That book I think is really important for anyone who wants to incorporate a critical pedagogy approach in the classroom, anyone who's concerned with students' critical consciousness, developing students' critical consciousness, that's a great resource to embrace. bell hooks' writings stay in such a vast territory from race to gender class to sexuality. These are all the issues that my students are most concerned with, and they find really accessible. I find that, both her work as a pedagogue and as a pedagogical thinker, there is lots of wisdom to be divided there. There's also a lot that can be adapted just from her texts themselves in the classroom as well.

SW: You work with college students at Midlands Technical College in the Academic Success Center. Can you talk more about this institutional context, your position, and how you help train and tutor student writers?

NST: Yes, so the institutional context is really important. Midlands Technical College plays a very important role in South Carolina's higher education. It's a feeder school, if you will, that serves as a really important point of contact for students entering higher education. I'm sure it's not unknown to you about where southern states tend to fall into education, into educational rankings. South Carolina, being one of those states that is always somewhere in the forties when it comes to educational ranking, lots of our students graduate from high school under prepared for college. Institutions like technical college and other two-year schools in the higher education system here in South Carolina are critical resources for helping students gain access to higher education.

In the English and composition classroom, within that structure, plays such a pivotal role that is the very heart and center of students' capacity to matriculate through higher education. Without the skills that you gain in your English classroom literacy, there is no higher education from which to be obtained, so our role is extremely important. I take my role in that whole system just as importantly as I see this classroom in the institutional context. I was also a graduate of South Carolina's two-year colleges, and so I know what it's like to go through that. I also know what students need having gotten on the other side. I take all those experiences and really use that to mold and shape my teaching. Here's a majority Black school, but not by a substantial amount. Many of the students are low income. There's a rising population of English learning students and undocumented students as well. We have a demographic context where many of our students come from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. You have to be responsive to those deficits that students bring in the classroom. You have to know how to do remediation. You need

to know how to handle students with love and care. That's extremely important. I've seen just the English classroom make and break students in this institutional context. I've seen students drop out of college because of the English classroom. What we do is really important, and especially here with the students I work with who mostly come from disadvantaged backgrounds, that importance is just paramount.

SW: Your teaching and research interests include working towards educational equity. I'm interested in hearing more about this research and your experiences with educational equity and inequity. What direction is your research taking, and what should educators be thinking more about right now in terms of equity and then through our systems, curriculum, and policies?

NST: Absolutely. Education equity is something that's also dear to my heart. As I mentioned, I sat in the seat of the students that I teach. I was a South Carolina public school graduate, and I graduated with all the educational deficits that come with that for students. Education equity is paramount to not only experience, but also how I came into teaching was in the South Juvenile Justice. Education equity is absolutely core and essential to me. Right now, my education equity is mainly focused on how this rise of right-wing populism has enabled many states to reverse the gains that progressive educators have been able to gain foothold in states. Now we're seeing, of course, this wave of critical race theory laws. We're seeing this new wave of laws against trans students. We're seeing all these reversals of some really important gains that progressive educators and education reformers have been able to win in these concessions that educators have within the past ten years. I'm really concerned with the rise of populism and what that means for our education and for the nation as a whole. I've been thinking a lot about that in terms of education equity, and I really think that that needs to be a priority for anyone who sees themselves as having a stake in education and equity work. That needs to be a part of the things that we're thinking about right now in terms of just resources and other things that I think that educators should be thinking about.

There are some great resources out there right now. I love what's going on in the Almar Public school district in Charlottesville, Virginia. That school district seats the city of Charlottesville. What's going on in Almar I think is really a model for how southern states can really approach this education equity work just unabashed and just full throttle. What they're doing down there is just nothing short of amazing, from their complete anti-racist policy that they have adopted to the curricular development that they're doing there to the faculty and staff training and the way that they're really reshaping their institutions from the ground up to really reflect an equity focus. I think there's so many lessons to learn there, and they're making that journey fully accessible to onlookers through their website. I would encourage folks to go check out their website and see what's going on over there. I think that is probably right now for me, the model for equity work and education, so I definitely encourage folks to look over there.

There are some other great resources. There is, for example, the great column that's happening right now in *Education Week*. In *Education Week*, Larry Lazzo has been doing a really great blog and has been inviting teachers from all around the country to descend on issues of national importance for teachers and education. That's a resource that people should be plugged into right now. There's so many great things out there, and if there's any...that could send some more, but there is just so many great things. There's so much great equity work going on, and I'm really

happy about that. I know when I started getting into education, I was concerned about where the state of equity work was, but having gotten more involved in this field and seeing some of the great work that's been done, having made acquaintances and colleagues with some of these great equity leaders in our fields, despite the challenges, I'm really happy and inspired by the work that actually is being done on the ground.

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