

Episode 139: Patti Poblete

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Patti Poblete talks about teaching at a two-year college in Washington, graduate education and pedagogical development, writing program administration, and using social media to document conferences.

Patti Poblete is English faculty at South Puget Sound Community College and part of the editorial team for WPA, Writing Program administration. Previously she acted as WPA at Henderson State University. Her research includes public and digital rhetorics, writing pedagogy and cultural criticism.

Patti, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You teach at South Puget Sound Community College. Talk to me more about your institutional context and your approach to teaching writing.

PP: Sure. So South Puget Sound Community College, I'm actually super brand new. This is just my second quarter, so I think I understand what this place is about, but I don't know for sure. So we're in Western Washington Community College obviously, and it's actually kind of really interesting to me just because it's very different from what I've done before. This is my first time at a two-year, but we have, let me see, we have about 5,000 plus students, which is a decent size, bigger than my last college actually. But what's most interesting for me is 20% are Running Start students. So that's the State's sort of kind of like a dual enrollment program where it's high school students taking college classes.

But yeah, it's a significant chunk of our population, which I honestly actually did not know when I started the job. So it's sort of fun to have that sort of dynamic that's going on in class. I don't know, in terms of approaching teaching, I, as many of us do, I start out in a job doing first year comp, doing a lot of first year comp, which I love doing luckily. So there's that. But I think what I've been trying to do as I approach my classes and I've been trying to do more and more over time is just figure out what the students are actually expecting from the class and trying to explain what I think the class is about and then figuring out a way to meet in the middle. So we've been doing a lot of discussion of just, "What exactly are we doing here and here's me giving you stuff and then tell me if this makes sense."

I've been doing this thing with my students where at the end of every class, at the end of every activity, I give them a space to be like, "Write down a question or a comment that you have." And that's everything we do, everything online, everything in person. And then depending on if they're willing to have it shared or if it seems applicable, I'll share it with everyone. And I set myself up for a lot of questions about, what's the point of this. So the next class is me for 10 minutes talking about, "Here's what I think the point of that was," which takes up some time. But I think I've actually really enjoyed doing. I think my students appreciate it or perhaps they are

growing to doubt me more and more every class. I can't tell sometimes. But I think that that's actually made things a lot more productive when we actually continue on and approach what we're doing in the classroom, is if I can explain what I think the point of this is, maybe you can find some way into that that makes more sense for you.

And sometimes I don't, and that's okay too, I think is having that sort of honesty with the students, is them saying, "Listen, I'm just going to do this thing, and that's okay." I had a fun question from one student. I don't know, fun. He was sincere and we were both very sincere, but he asked, "How am I supposed to care about something that I don't care about?" And I was just like, "Well, sometimes I try to make things so that you can find a way to approach something that's interesting to you. So with a research paper, I give you an umbrella topic and then you find a thing that you care about. And sometimes that's useful, sometimes it's just that you just sort of appreciate the skillset that you're trying to develop or the thing that you're trying to get in terms of outcomes." But yeah, we had this talk which is like, "And sometimes you just got to do a thing that you don't care about and that's what life is like sometimes. So we'll make this as straightforward and painless as possible, and that's okay too."

SW: You mentioned being new to South Puget Sound, and I'm interested in hearing more about your move from a four-year university to a two-year college, particularly this institutional context. Can you talk more about this move and maybe what you've learned and what you're still learning about your students?

PP: I always try to figure out how do I do this without just listing my CV for people. And no, that's totally just the nature of the work. Right? So my previous institution was a small liberal arts public institution in Arkansas. We were in a fairly rural area, and so we had I think something like 3000 students. But what was interesting for that population is we had, I think the majority of first generation students in that area, which was kind of neat just in terms of the kinds of conversations we had. So a lot of the stuff that I just talked about is sort of rooted in the conversations I had there. So that was interesting. Prior to that, I was at my previous two institutions before that were gigantic state colleges. I was at Iowa State and before that I was at Purdue. Those were much bigger. Those campuses were larger than the previous towns that I've lived in, cities perhaps. Very different student populations.

So sort of that trajectory of going from very large institutions with particular types of populations, tech oriented in a lot of ways, engineering institutions, large international student populations to my very small colleges of first generation students has been a shift in the way people are approaching education quite honestly. One thing that's been really fun for me in terms of shifting from a four-year to a two-year is that I had no idea how much time I was spending previously trying to convince people to become English majors until I no longer had to convince people to become English majors. There's just none of the soul-searching of just like, "How do we convince people that this is a cool thing to do with our lives?"

Because I mean, it is. That's what I'm doing. I'd like to think I'm cool, I don't know. But I think a lot of it then becomes the conversation, and this is not going to be a surprise to anyone, about like, "Hey, what's the point of an English major and how that connects to what we do within the field?" Where with higher education generally, and with a lot of our institutions now, it's like,

"How is this directly created, connected to a career that someone might have? How is this useful? What things are you doing that we can immediately monetize?"

And in some ways, it's a relief to not have to do that sort of weird defensiveness in a lot of ways. That's nice. But then I also become like, "Wait a second, do I think that what I do in a writing class should be monetizable immediately?" Now not having to talk about how cool it would be to be an English major, am I losing that connection, that thread? I don't think so. But I don't know, maybe people can talk to me in a year and ask me what happened to me. I don't know. Maybe that's what the conversation will be later. That's sort of the most interesting part, is just not that need to prove that, "Hey, aren't you having so much fun in this class? Don't you want to make this your entire life? To my population of students who maybe one of them ever thought about being an English major and everyone else would like to move on with their lives.

SW: Patti, thinking back to your graduate education and pedagogical training at large R1s and even spaces that had a science technology and engineering focus, was there something that could have been talked about more, maybe something that could have been focused on more in those pedagogy classes or in the graduate curriculum that could have helped you as a teacher in your current two-year college context?

PP: Oh. Oh, a loaded question. No, it's interesting because I think in a lot of ways it does get back to sort of the education of folks who, those of us who trained to go into the teaching of writing in some way and rhetoric and sort of that sort of weird quiet divide between rhetoric and composition in a lot of ways. I think that we spend a lot of time talking about what we should be doing with the courses and we don't spend a lot of time talking with what the students think we should be doing with the courses.

And of course there should be a separation between those two things. When you're a student, there are a lot of things you don't know about what will be useful and what will be helpful and what will be valuable. Things that I learned as an undergrad, I never thought I would be still thinking about them. I think that that student, sort of student concerns, student attitudes, that's what they're bringing into the class, that's what they're contributing to the classroom community. And I think we don't take that into account enough. When we talk about pedagogy, it should be about what the students are wanting to find out and not how we're poking students to what we think they should be finding out I guess. If I think about a lot of the work that we were doing when we're talking about the teaching of writing when I was in those larger institutions was really tied to multi-modality, really tied to, "What are we doing digitally?"

So what was wonderful about when I was teaching at Purdue, when I was teaching at Iowa State was that we had computer classroom days that were actually integrated into what we were doing in the classroom. So there was always at least a day a week where we were in a computer lab and doing this work and talking about multi-modality and talking about all those different things, and we could do great stuff with video projects, with podcasts, ha ha, with any sort of design work.

And then I went to Henderson and here I'm at South Puget Sound where we don't have that. At Henderson, we had no computer labs for students. That just was not an availability. It wasn't something we could talk about. I was working with populations in that space and a little bit in this space too, of students who don't have access to computers at home. And how am I supposed

to talk about multi-modality when they can't access assignments from home, when they're asking me if it's okay if they're writing their papers on their phones? Those are really way different ways to approach talking about composition and talking about just doing the work of a classroom where I started out thinking, this is what everyone is going to have. Because I didn't have to consider it. I didn't have to because we had those resources available at the campus. And so they were also residential colleges, so that was just available to the students. I don't have that anymore.

My students don't have that anymore. And I've had to just not factor those things into what we talk about. It's very weird for me to not be constantly talking about multi-modality, but when I have students who can't compose in that sort of space in the way that I was trained to teach them to talk about composing in that space, what do I do with that? So that's the sort of shift I guess that changed.

Another thing that was really fascinating to me is the idea of conferencing with students. And my very, very first institution where I did my master's was a smaller institute, 2000 students. Conferencing with students was sort of a thing that we did. So I would be teaching two classes or four classes depending on where I was, and that made sense because we had course caps, that 15 or 20 students. Living the dream it turns out. I am teaching three classes currently here at South Puget Sound, and my course cap for those classes is 28. I tried to do student conferences in one week and I don't know why, I didn't even do the math. I didn't even do the math of just like, "Is this physically possible? Is this possible in terms of hours in a day?" It's not. I'll tell you right now, it's not if you can't. So having to figure out, it's hugely important to have those one-on-one conversations with students, and I've been just struggling to figure out logistically, is it even possible for me to do that anymore. And that's again, been a really large shift.

SW: Your research interests include writing program administration and public rhetorics and battlegrounds and common grounds. Your article in composition forum, you write about negotiating between disciplinary values and institutional context. Can you talk more about how writing program administrators can navigate these tensions and maybe you could provide an example?

PP: Sure. I mean, I think the biggest thing, like we mentioned before was just sort of that emphasizing careers as opposed to learning stuff. And that's I guess, the conflict that is in the heart of liberal arts right now is what do we used to have education for and liberal arts was to help people become citizens. And as we dig deeper into that, we're like, "Oh, well, those were all lies as well. That's fine."

That was not what was happening. But the idea used to be that you're learning this stuff because that will be good to learn about that stuff, and that's not the way society functions now. And I think that's a struggle that a lot of us are facing. So this is again, that idea of, "How am I going to recruit majors?" Figuring out how to speak those sorts of things is really interesting. One of the really interesting things that happened at my previous institution, and it was a very difficult time there because there were some serious financial issues. So they actually ended up... yeah, the institution is drastically different now and now that I've left, it's drastically different. It wasn't just me, it's not me leaving that made it drastically different. Those changes were in the air to be clear, but there was just a lot of how do we continue to offer philosophy classes or have a philosophy department if there's only one required philosophy class and that's an option out of six other classes. That's the sort of discussion that folks have when they're talking about

departments, talking about programs is like, "So how do we continue to remain relevant when we're all just scrambling to get a slot on the general education curriculum?"

That's tough. I don't know if there's really any good solution to that. When you're living within the realm of humanities, it's hard for us to make those arguments because it's just not the problem. The problem is capitalism, let's solve. And it's just not something that's easily solvable because the push to make everything super efficient, to make everything super, super directly connected to making money in some way is just not, I believe. I think most of my colleagues and the audience will be aware that that's not really what we're into in English as a field. So how do we talk about it without, again, sounding defensive about, "No, we communicate with everybody and this is how we can communicate," without sounding like we're scrambling to retain our funding, except that we're scrambling to retain our funding. I think one of the things that we can do as a field or writing program administrators can do is just really have some direct conversations first of all with other faculty.

One of the really cool things that I did in Purdue. I was a graduate student at the time, so I had nothing to do with the formation. I was just on the edges of it, is that one of the professors in the animal science program was noticing trends with his majors where they were struggling on the job market because they didn't have particular types of experience in writing. So that professor made writing a component of the genetics class where there were writing instructors sort of attached to it in a kind of lab section essentially, and who came and did direct instruction on how to write a report, how to write your resume, how to do that sort of stuff. That seems pretty directly, I felt, it was directly instructional. Just like, "All right, everyone, resume time." But also making it explicit that, "Hey, you're in animal science. You have to do these things. Your professor has done some work in identifying that you have to do these things. Alums in your program have identified these are things that they needed. And so we brought into this class." This is also, side note, why I have this fun line in my CV that says genetics instructor. So that's hilarious to me. But talking with folks in other programs specifically about what do you see people needing.

Of course there's always going to be that clash of just like, again, "Are we going to talk about how your students need to know how to spell and use commas, really?" But there was also that clear, "I think there's something here that we're not able to provide in our program and you say that you know how to do, let's figure out a way to merge with that." So that's a lot of WAC stuff, writing across the curriculum stuff, writing in discipline stuff. I think the other thing too is just talking to students and amplifying student voices and how they see themselves finding value in classes. And I think in a lot of ways having those sorts of testimonials about what students are gaining from their classes. I think that that could be possibly the most valuable defense that we have is just asking students, "Hey, would you be willing to write or share a little bit about how you see the work that you did in our writing program, helping you with other stuff?"

SW: This is my last question, it's apparent to me and many others, your commitment to our field at-large. There's no one better at documenting our conference happenings than you via Twitter. It's an incredibly valuable resource, extremely accessible and important. So, thank you for doing that work. Talk to me about the importance of this work, why you're motivated to do it, and why others ought to consider making their teaching and research more public.

PP: I feel like at this juncture, we all can acknowledge it, Twitter is sort of a weird space at this point in time. There's just a lot of conversations of just like, "Hey, is it going to exist soon?" Who knows? So there's that issue there. Who knows what the future holds for Twitter as an actual platform. I'd like to think that social media may become more disparate, but it will continue on in different ways.

But I will say that I'm incredibly blessed that I can type really fast and that might have brought me the most success in all of this is just typing really fast. But I think it's important work. I got involved with it because it was fun. I like being on social media and there was, it doesn't happen so much anymore, but there was hilarious summers when I would go from computers and writing conference to Comic-Con in San Diego and my tweeting was about the same level. So there was some really fun crossover there with my audiences. It was just fun ways to make observations about things I was hearing, things that I thought other people would find funny or just something that they may not have heard otherwise. I mean, I think over time it just became, "Hey, I'm good at this thing, so I'm going to keep doing this thing." And luckily that other people are like, "Hey, this is cool."

So I have literally just run with the thing that people connected with the most. But I think as I've talked to folks who haven't been able to go to conferences particularly, or folks who as we know now, it's impossible to go to all the things that you want to go to in conferences. So I think that there's a lot of value in just having someone who's just providing the information as it happens. Because I think there are a lot of great forums where people are doing sort of like, "Here's what we saw at the conference," and doing sort of post-conference reporting or post panel reporting. But that's very different from the experience of being there at the time where you can't really capture some of the way some beats are landing, you can't capture the tone of the room. And that's the thing with any of us who are sort of sharing this information online is we're very often concerned about, "Will this get me in trouble?"

The interesting thing about live tweeting as I've done is I don't really have the time to think about whether anything's going to get me in trouble. And luckily mostly it hasn't gotten me in trouble. But sharing sort of, "Here's what I'm hearing, here's how I think other people would be hearing things, here's what I think is important." I think there are many times when the things that I pick up are not necessarily the things that the presenters would think of as their major points. I'm just like, "Oh, here's the thing that I think is cool, and that's the thing I'm going to share." When I do any sort of live tweeting, I try to honor what the speakers are saying. So I'll try to sort of hit, "Here's a major point they've said, here's a major point. Here's this other thing that they're saying." But I also do like this thing where I'll put little parenthetical notes of, "Here's a cool thing that maybe is not the thing that they care about."

I also try to not nitpick things as people are speaking. That's where, I guess, where I do my second guessing of myself is that it's important to be generous when you're doing this kind of work because it's hard to do this, to get in front of people and talk about stuff that maybe is not complete yet. I went to a lot of presentations this time around, [inaudible 00:24:05] where people are like, "Hey, if you're tweeting, that's great, but also don't share these materials yet because I'm still gathering my data. I'm still figuring out what I want to say for sure." So conferences are a liminal space, so we do want to be a little bit careful about that. But I think it's important to

continue to do the live tweeting, being respectful of what people are ready to share. But I think it's the best way to get conversations going at this point that the as much... hm, I'm going to get into a weird space here.

So with academic publishing, I think it's still a good way to share ideas, but it's so slow in a lot of ways, and some of the conversations are so fraught and the level of gatekeeping can be pretty intense depending on where you're looking. So I'm part of the editorial team for WPA, Writing Program Administration, and we've been having this conversation for a year and a half of just like, "So how are we going to deal with this sort of stuff?" So we created this one new category. I'm going to totally go into marketing mode here, sorry, Shane, of we have this new article category called Everything is Praxis, which is still a peer reviewed article space, but we've formed it so they're shorter than the more traditional manuscripts. So there are 3000 to 5000 words in total, instead of 5000 to a million or whatever. But the emphasis on them is sort of, "Hey, can you talk really directly about the things, the experiences that you are dealing with right now, and then sort of put that into context? But we want to focus on the stuff that you're doing, how it relates to what's going on currently, what people might be concerned about, and then talk a little bit about how that might apply to other folks." Whereas if we think about traditional manuscripts, this is a joke, and this is not true of anywhere, but I'm going to exaggerate for comedic effect, is like, "Okay, here's 20 pages of literature review and then here's a page of a thing that I think is cool. That's my article."

That is how it feels sometimes. And that's important work too. Lit reviews are hugely important, as we all say as people, but that's also a level of gatekeeping and presenting barriers to folks who are perhaps new in the field and think, "I can't write about this. I can't share about this because I haven't read 20 pages of lit review." So that's sort of what we're trying to do with Everything is Praxis, is to get to like, "Hey, no, what's important is what you're doing." And I think that's why social media in academic space is important too, is that that barrier for entry is not actually evident anymore. You can't put 20 pages of lit review in a tweet. That's impossible. You can try, but it'd be really boring. So having that immediacy and that brevity allows for more people to speak and perhaps make an impression in a way that traditional scholarly work does not allow for.

We need both of those things. We absolutely need both of those things. But if we're going to bring in new voices, if we're going to keep the field and the discipline and our work relevant to what other folks are thinking and what our students are needing, we have to find a way to emphasize the now more than the then.

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