

Episode 22: Paula Mathieu

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, I'm fortunate to talk to an incredibly kind teacher and scholar who has done so much for people inside and outside academia. Paula Mathieu has devoted her life to pushing the walls of education and expanding our understandings of writing and literacy. She is deeply committed to community engagement and partnerships and social justice. In *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*, she writes, "The most important lessons about writing I have learned come from working with writers who are or have been homeless."

Paula Mathieu is a writer and teacher. She works at Boston College where she is Associate Professor of English and Director of First-Year Writing. She teaches courses in writing as social action, first-year writing, mindful storytelling, creative nonfiction, and rhetoric. She wrote *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* and co-edited three essay collections, including *Circulating Communities: The Tactics and Strategies of Community Publishing*.

In this episode, we talk about mindfulness and contemplative practices, how writing teachers can foster kindness and self-reflection, and she carefully examines the current state of writing studies and offers future direction.

Paula, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Let's start by talking about incorporating mindfulness in the writing classroom. In your article "Being There," you write, "Mindful awareness practices can help us teach both the human and the being--which can lead to more ethical practice." Do you mind sharing what got you interested in mindfulness and contemplative practices, and how that informs your teaching?

PM: I think simple definitions are always useful. I think Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as "nonjudgmental awareness of the current moment," and he says, "paying attention as if your life depended on it." Then he always says, "which of course, it does." For me, it's the nonjudgmental awareness, which is really a challenge I think for me and for students. I got interested in bringing more contemplative and mindful practices into my teaching, mainly because it was what I needed as a human being. It wasn't because I'm somehow an expert and this really fully self-actualized person. But more that I realized that the chatter in my own brain and that the stories that I tell myself in my head, that I never circulate to anyone else, are sometimes the most powerful stories that I tell. And they're often powerfully disabling.

I realized that the same thing is often true with students. That you could look at students who are very potentially well qualified to be in the classroom, who are smart, who are capable, and

they're really struggling. Then another student who might not seem as prepared or as capable, but they're flourishing. Some of the differences have to do with their own hidden stories about themselves, the beliefs they have, the fears they have.

So part of contemplative work I do in the writing classroom is to acknowledge that whole set of that inner rhetoric that we all have that either tells ourselves, "Hey, I can do this," or, "I can't." There's lots of scholarship on whether we have a growth mindset or a fixed mindset and all this kind of stuff. But I feel like in a writing classroom, at least I wasn't focusing so much on what are the deep-seated fears or beliefs that the students come in with that they might not even want to share. And maybe they don't even need to share them.

That was part of what got me started. Then also my background working in community-based writing, doing community projects with a lot of people from very different class positions, with very different racial histories, very different just life histories. And seeing the personal dysfunction that would arise that could really undo a lot of great projects or cut projects short. And realizing that each and every one of us has work to do to come to terms with who we are. And are we either adding to that noise and dysfunction? Or are we adding greater equanimity? Are we injecting peace and some sort of sense of compassion into our scene? Or are we bringing reactivity? Are we bringing stuff?

As a scholar, it was when I was asked a question once: "What does it mean to be a responsive teacher or scholar?" It was from the 2013 Watson Symposium, I think. Then, my immediate response was, "being present to those students who are actually in your class." Because I know as a teacher, and also working with new teachers, how often we work with ghosts. We think about the class we had last semester, which either was awesome or didn't go that well. And how we're teaching to that student we couldn't get through to last semester, or the student who got under our skin.

This is a long way of saying my interest in mindfulness came from realizing how hard it is to be truly present in the classroom with the students you have, because you have to plan a class before you've met those students. You have to build it based on these assumptions of what they need, which may or may not be true once they get there. So how do you, as a teacher, be fully mindful and present with the students? But then also, how do we help the students in their own lives, which are hectic and crazy and often very stressful, to be present in the moments that they're in? So that their education just doesn't become a blur of classes. How do they find moments of meaning and really connect?

SW: How do mindful practices help you see writing and what writing does or can do?

PM: I think what I love about writing is seeing writing as a tool for living. It's a basic tool for living, that it's not just about academic success; that that can be important. But it can also be about helping you be present in a moment. It can be something that helps yourself. It can be an interpersonal tool to help you reconcile something with another person through a letter or

through some kind of written exchange. Then it can also be a means of social action. How do I participate in the wider world, and try to help heal the world that I'm in?

For me, writing works on all those levels. But I don't think; at least the writing classes I took coming up in the world; I wasn't taught writing in those ways. For me, why I want there to be mindful practices, to help students see writing as a tool that can help them with their daily lives. To help them slow down, pay attention to the current moment, and just be aware of the ways that they're being judgmental or nonjudgmental about themselves or others around them.

SW: In what ways do you incorporate compassion and mindfulness in the writing classroom? For example, do you use a charter for compassion? Or do you encourage students to self-reflect or use deep breathing exercises?

PM: Well, I think it depends on what the classroom is, and how much of that experience students have signed up for. I do teach one class that's an elective; it's called Mindful Storytelling. Pretty much all those things you've mentioned; that we do breathing, whole body meditation, we do drawing, we do writing exercises. Then we do a lot of writing that interrogates what are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, or the world that we'd like to revise. That's a class that's contemplative at its very foundations, and students choose to be in that kind of classroom.

In a first-year writing classroom, try to introduce mindfulness as a way to help us slow down and be better writers. That mindfulness is a tool for writing. Also, that writing is a tool for mindfulness, which brings greater well-being and helps people get through their daily lives. Because I think of first-year writing as really an introduction to the university. How do you help students come from wherever they've come from, leave their families; be in this space that, depending on their race and gender and class status, is either a small step or a huge and alienating step. How do they be in that space and not feel like they don't belong there?

In my first-year writing class, I introduced breathing exercises like that in small ways, just to call us all to attention, to welcome everyone to the space, and start the class in a way where we have a shared focus. Starting last fall, I do two things right at the beginning of the semester. The first day of class, I assign students to write a letter to themselves as writers about a thought or an idea they have about themselves as writers that they would like to change. That's the full instructions, and it's due the second day of class. They don't know me, they don't know anything. I only started it last fall, so I'm doing it again. But the students wrote these extraordinary letters that were full of just all kinds of doubts and pains. But then also with this really great advice; they showed how they know quite a bit already about writing.

So what I did is I took all the letters and I created two side-by-side essays using a sentence from each student's piece. It's a little of what you're doing with the podcast. It took a little bit of editing and massaging to make them all go together, but one half was airing all their fears about their inadequacies and what they can't do as writers. Then the other was the essay of expressing

their hopes or beliefs on what they might be able to do. And we read that in class. I think it helps students see that they're not the only ones.

Students were really surprised. They said, "I thought I was the only one who felt this way." I think it really helped them see that there's this underlife of inside of everybody that we all have these voices that talk to ourselves. And to realize that it's just what minds do. That the nature of the mind is to create thoughts. Some of them will be positive, and some will be negative. That doesn't mean they're necessarily true.

SW: Paula, you have been incredibly influential to the development of community-engaged pedagogies. You are one of the pioneers for community partnerships and community writing in rhetoric and composition. Do you mind providing a brief definition for community-engaged pedagogies?

PM: It's usually working with community groups, often who are lower income, but not always. But then it's also taken the form of people doing community publishing. There's now healthy prison writing, or writing between college students and prisoners. So it's not only student involved, it can be faculty involved, it can be also independent community groups may have started in an institution, but evolve to be their own nonprofits. I think community writing is the extra curriculum where it's writing when people are doing it not for some other reason. They're not doing it for a grade, they're not doing it for credentializing. But they're doing it for some other community purpose, whether it's to try to make change in their community or record something in their community or help address a problem in their community.

SW: I understand that this next question might be too broad or too problematic or too generalizing. But I'm thinking about Tactics of Hope which was published in 2005. I'm really curious as to whether you think writing studies and writing classrooms have done a good job supporting this kind of public turn? Then, what challenges do you continue to see working against writing programs and classrooms when it comes to building relationships with community organizations?

PM: I actually loved this question when I saw it. I was like, "Oh, that's a great question." I don't think it's too broad at all. I just want to preface this by saying everything I'm saying is a generalization, and I'm not trying to indict specific people or programs or ideas. But I do think there's some amazing work going on in community-engaged writing. And I think that the Coalition for Community Writing and the Conference for Community Writing is an amazing place for that to happen. And the journal, Community Literacy Journal, is publishing a lot of that work. I think there's an incredibly vibrant aspect of our field that is just so exciting and so rich.

But at the same time, I feel like the push for writing studies and that terminology, to me, threatens to be more about disciplinarity and what writing means only within the bounds of the university, than the full life of a student or a community or the world. I worry that a push toward writing about writing, or threshold concepts and these kinds of very measurable outcomes-driven

scholarship. Empirical scholarship risks the conscience and the guts that Paulo Freire legacy of composition and the Lester Faigley legacy of composition.

That we need to support the public sphere; that community-engaged writing, place-based writing, getting students to write about places, to think about the vibrancy of a place, to think about the engagement in the world. That can be quite different than, "What does it mean to be successful in your major." Those aren't, I think, opposite goals. I don't think it's wrong to teach students to care about success in the academy. But I don't think a writing class should be equivalent to success in the university.

I think that's too small a vision for what writing should be, and certainly too small a vision for what writing studies should be. It's a generalization to say that's what people who support a disciplinary writing studies approach would support. But I think there is that tendency to want things to be measurable and to be scholarly and to be very intellectual, very thought based.

Where I feel like my commitments are to disrupting that a little bit, and to say sometimes thinking is the very problem. Sometimes our ideas about who we are as scholars is the problem. We need to ask more questions and be more humble and listen more. Be part of the community and do the anti-racist work. And do some of this stuff that doesn't necessarily look like measurable outcomes-based writing, to be the best version of who we can be as a field.

SW: Where would you encourage rhetoric and composition to turn now?

PM: There has been more of a turn toward disciplinarity and a turn toward professionalism in a way that I don't think is problematic per se but it's problematic when that becomes all that we are. I think it's good for many things. I think it's good for programs that have a major in writing or people go on to get PhDs in Comp-Rhet. But to me, that's a very small slice of who comes to a university. Very small. And thinking about, "What else is writing good for?" is a much bigger question, that to me is really exciting.

That includes thinking about writing as a form of social action, writing as a form of contemplative action and writing as a form of just slowing ourselves down; that somehow writing just helps us slow down in a world that's sped up way too fast. That to me, those are just as useful. And that there needs to be a balance. If we're only focusing on the intellect, we lose the values we learn from bodies and emotions and stillness and all this other less quantifiable stuff.

When there's a lot of push toward empirical research; and I know you can do empirical research on contemplation. Much is being done in the sciences, for which I'm grateful. But I also think there should be a place for writing pedagogies that embrace things that aren't empirical. Because to me, writing is a tool for living and managing an institution. Being able to navigate successfully through an institution is one aspect of living. But that's just one small aspect of living. Having peace inside your own head or being able to understand more deeply your motives for doing something. Some of the work in our field that I'm most interested now is really

narrative based, really focusing on why do we do the work we do? What are our motivations? What are the stories that we often don't share?

A great book by Amy Robillard called *We Find Ourselves in Other People's Stories*, which has been really influential to me; that this idea that there's reasons that we get interested in the work that we do. We should be more willing to share those stories and be more embracing of narrative and storytelling. If we become a field that only embraces its analytic disciplinary side, we lose something. I don't have a problem with writing about writing or threshold concepts being part of the field. But I worry when that becomes the sum total of what the field is, and that public writing or personal writing or interpersonal writing or other kinds of writing or narrative writing become seen as less valuable or less central.

Eli Goldblatt gave a ... I was fortunate enough to be on a panel with Eli a few years ago at 4Cs. He talked about Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, and that being the first book someone had ever given him, which made him want to pursue a career in writing and rhetoric. I thought that was a really powerful statement; thinking about what are the books that we want graduate students to read? What are the core ideas? How do we engage people's minds and their passions, their emotions, their hearts?

That it's not just about intellectual work. It's about the stories we have and the lives we've led and the emotions we have. That's all, to me, just as important as the analytic ideas and the arguments that we can make. How do we make room for that, too? That we can have a disciplinary presence, and see the value of community and public sphere engagement as really important. And seeing contemplative work as central to it. Because if rhetoric were enough on its own, we would have a healthier democracy than we do at the moment. That ideas aren't enough. That having the best information, having the facts and having the best approaches to persuasion aren't enough, because people get identified for reasons that aren't necessarily about good ideas. They're about who their friends are, or who were their parents, or where they grew up, or what they're afraid of, or who they love or what they love.

We're so deeply identified with our beliefs that we've got to have more creative ways of thinking about how to teach that. It can't just be about intellect. Because that's a piece of the puzzle, but it's not the whole puzzle.

SW: Thank you Paula, and thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.