Pedagogue Bonus: Managing to Write with Heavy Teaching Loads (w/Joanne Baird Giordano)
Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue Bonus, a short episode that covers a single topic or question. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

I asked this question on Twitter a few weeks ago – what pedagogy or practice or concept do you want to hear about on the podcast? – and a couple of people responded saying they'd like to hear someone talk about how a teacher with heavy teaching loads and caregiving responsibilities manages to write, or what practices and strategies might help someone without much time or institutional support. Thankfully, these terrific teacher-scholars on Twitter also offered a few names to reach out to who could speak on this issue more. So I sent an email to Joanne Baird Giorgidano, and she agreed to come on the podcast to chat about this topic.

Joanne Baird Giordano teaches at Salt Lake Community College. She previously coordinated the developmental reading, writing, and ESL program for the University of Wisconsin System's two-year colleges. Her work on two-year college writers and teaching at open-access institutions has appeared in *College English, CCC*, *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, *Pedagogy, the Journal of Writing Assessment,* and edited collections. Her professional service includes chairing the TYCA National Conference; chairing the TYCA task force on reading; serving on the *CCC* editorial board; and doing research and writing for TYCA task forces on workload, placement, and developmental education reforms.

Joanne, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: So, to preface this question, I'm thinking specifically about teachers who are teaching 4 to 5 classes or more a semester or quarter, who might be commuting back and forth to work, who might be adjuncting at different institutions, or who might be teaching at a two-year college, who might not be getting a lot of financial or institutional support for research, and who might have other caregiving responsibilities at home. So with that in mind, what are some practices or strategies for managing heavy teaching loads and other personal and professional responsibilities and commitments that consume a lot of time and energy? And more specifically, how can a teacher who finds themselves in this position manage to write?

JG: Okay, so one of the things I want to do is start with a little bit of research from the Two-Year College English Association. So I'm on a task force that is investigating workload for two-year college faculty, so particularly what are the ways that your college faculty have to adjust how they teach, how they do service, how they do professional development in a very teaching-intensive workload. I'm at an institution where I have a 4/4 workload if I do writing center work, but most people are in a 5/5 situation, up to an 8/8 situation. And there's a lot of people who do up to 8 courses just to get enough money to make it through the summer.

So one of the things that I've been working on in that particular project, is doing some survey analysis of teaching adjustments that people make. So we did a nationwide survey in fall of 2019, and more than a thousand people responded. And within that, one of the questions was

just, "What kinds of adjustments do you make to your teaching to manage workload?" And my particular task was looking at, specifically, the choices people made. So the things in their lives that they could control, which were different from an administrator imposing something on them or something that was just a life circumstance, and so what were the choices they're making and the strategies that they're using. And we identified three different patterns.

One was just choices about what they're going to teach, when they're going to teach, and where they're going to teach, which is interesting because a lot of the books that are available for how to teach writing are focused on graduate students who don't have those choices, and adjuncts don't have a lot of those choices, but that's one thing that a lot of people were reporting. They were managing their time selectively in that way. They're also choices about how to teach the individual course sections, which is something that most instructors and most programs have control over. And then, the last one was just choices about people's professional responsibility. So how do they balance out a teaching-intensive workload and have time for teaching and for the other parts of their lives?

So one of the things I want to do is just kind of go through each of those three categories and explain what I do and how I manage my time. So I'm involved in probably a lot more research than most people, so right now I have five different projects between research and a book project, plus I'm the outgoing Chair of the TYCA national conference, and I have a few smaller pieces that we're kind of done with the research and we're just doing the writing. But I'm able to manage that just partly because I use my time very strategically.

And the first thing really is on choosing what I'm going to teach in a particular semester. So I really try to have courses that are taught on the same day and close to each other. And so for me, that's Tuesdays and Thursdays. I spend my Mondays usually prepping for classes, follow ups for stuff from students over the weekend, and also having meetings with research partners. And then Tuesday and Thursdays, those are the days, except for email and sometimes some quick meetings, I devote those days entirely to students and teaching. And one of the only reasons I'm able to do that though, is I do always try to teach online.

I try to balance out my schedule with some online teaching and some face-to-face teaching. And so those online courses, it's work that I enjoy doing and I know a lot of people don't, but it's a way that I create flexibility in my schedule because I can manage that in the evening or at other times of my life rather than being stuck. So I try to not teach more than two face-to-face courses and have a balanced schedule with two online and some writing center work, or if I'm teaching three classes, making sure three of those courses are online.

And then I also, when I'm thinking about when I schedule, I'm looking at my commute. So I have a 35 mile commute – in rush hour traffic that can take a long time, so I schedule my classes in the middle of the day or in the evening where I'm avoiding that long commute. And that's one of the things other people were identifying in the survey, that they were selective over how they did that based on how far they were and how they had to get to work. So those are just basic things that a lot of people can do, but unfortunately that's not an option available to some adjuncts.

So in terms of the choices I make about how I teach, there were really four different categories that people responded to on that question for the survey. And for me, it was interesting because I could identify things that I do with each of those categories. So they were things that reduce course preparation time, how they modified assignments, how they adjusted how they give feedback to students, and also how they grade, and then the ways that they use technology.

And so for me, the main thing I do to reduce course preparation time, which has been significant for me, is I treat my face-to-face courses like online courses in terms of, I put all of the materials in of course development shell, and so everything that a student needs, regardless if the students there in class, is available. And the main difference is I have pages for in class discussion activities, as opposed to online discussions and online workshops. So if a student misses class, it's all there. It makes it a lot easier for me when I work with students because in community colleges, we have a lot of students who fall behind the class. Everything's there and they can manage their time while I'm managing my time.

And then when I teach the class again, it's a lot of front-loaded work, but when I teach that class again, everything's there and I don't have to scramble to figure out what's going to happen. I just adapt and adjust. I also keep pretty detailed notes for things I need to revise. So sometimes it's knowing there's nothing I need to revise because the week went great, sometimes there's things I realize I need to make adjustments. I just keep a running log of the work that I have to do, so when I come back, I can make those changes. So because I do that, it does free up a lot of time, once I've taught a class, for other things, that I'm not really scrambling to prep for class every time.

And I try to take one class at a time and just work through that class for a whole year, which would be a year to make modifications, a semester to assess it, and then also, if I can, I try to teach in the summer, is when I really come back when I have more time to make significant revisions. And there are sometimes it takes me two years, but usually I'm done and then I move on to the next class, and I just leave the other classes. So that gives me a lot of time, because there's only one thing I'm really trying to fix at a time.

In terms of modifying assignments, one of the things that I did is, in my developmental courses, I reduced the major writing projects just to two a semester, and then the students do a lot of shorter work. And I found that those students, they can do a lot of process work that gives them more opportunities to work towards achieving the goals and learning outcomes for the course and I can really support them in class. But it saves up, normally, more time for me, but it's easier for students. And they're doing the same amount of work, it's just not these major projects. I have a humanities class and I realized I don't need to assign two writing projects in that class. It's an online course. The students do a lot of writing online. So I got rid of it, and I'm amazed at how much time that's freed up this summer for me as I've gotten rid of that, to spend more time on research and writing. Because it was a course that just didn't need that particular assignment. So those are some of the things that I do.

And one thing I do with grading that frees up some of my time for research is, I only give detailed feedback on one draft and I move a lot on my feedback to the classroom. So it's every class period, if it's an in-class activity, I'm giving students feedback on their work to every

student in the course. And then if it's an online class, I break it down into lots of little mini discussions where they're sharing their work, they're giving each other feedback, I'm responding, but I don't feel like I have to give detailed feedback if I'm responding in a discussion board, for example. And so that's one thing that I do. I don't spend as much time probably on grading as a lot of people. And when I do give that feedback that's written, it's very forward-facing. So it's, "Here's some things to do for revision. Here are some things to think about for the next writing project."

And it helps students process how they revise. I don't just write all over a paper because that takes a lot of time and I noticed that students don't really respond to that as much as just a quick to-do list or some suggestions for revision or some choices they might consider as they revise. So those are some things I do to adjust the way that I teach, which has reduced workload for me, and then frees it up for the question you asked about research and writing.

So for me, the most important part of that, and that's that last category that people responded to in the survey, is just making selective choices about how they use their time professionally and those responsibilities. So the most important thing I do is, if I can, I only do committee work that's tied to the teaching work that I do or to my research work. So for me right now, I'm on an equity-minded teaching committee and inclusivity committee in my department. I'm on an ESL committee and also an integrated reading-writing committee, because those are the courses that I'm teaching. So I can do that work together. And sometimes you have to take one for the team and be on a committee that no one wants to be on. But by doing that service work that ties into my teaching, it does free up time because those two things are related.

The most important thing I do is I work collaboratively with other people, research partners. And I found that by working with people on the research and the writing, it's not just if I have one partner that the time is halved, it's like we're four-times as productive with a partner I've just found than if any of us are working alone. And the reason for that is that we get together, we can get our ideas to flow, we can move our project forward, where one person might get stalled on it, somebody can move a project forward. I found that lots of collaborators, like four or five, actually slows the process down. Very little of my work I've done has been individual-authored projects. I do have some of those, but it's just a way to move things forward and be able to get a lot of writing done.

And I also try to make sure that the projects I work on are really tied to, either my values that I have about work in the profession or my teaching. So I've done a lot of work that it's coming from questions I have about how to teach better. And so, because I link it to my teaching, those projects are less-overwhelming, they're connected to things I know about that I can do and I can see the connections between that and my teaching, and it improves my teaching.

And then there are some things I do that are just my value. So one of the things that I'm trying to do right now is help other two-year college faculty do professional work and improve their teaching. So one of the research projects that I'm working on right now with Holly Hassel is a grant that we got from the Council of Writing Program Administrators. We're investigating what happens to two-year college faculty in their first year. And that project is easier for me because

it's just drawing from work I'm already doing, rather than trying to go off and invent a project. All of the projects that I work on are tied to work that I'm already doing.

And I think that one of the things that's really important for people to realize is that it is possible to do things if you break it down, but you do have to carefully manage your time. But it's really important that some, the faculty, not everybody, but that we do have more two-year college faculty doing work on teaching and learning, because over half of students in the United States, or close to half of them, at some point, take a community college course. And in any typical year, it's about a third of the students who are in higher education in the United States. There's not nearly as much work coming out of two-year colleges as there are out of research institutions, or not even less-selective public institutions that are open-access.

And what's really important is we need people who do that work to contribute to research and writing about those students, so we can identify evidence-based practices for helping students who are from underrepresented groups, who come from structurally disadvantaged backgrounds, returning adult learners, part-time students. There's a high number of students in the United States who are not native English speakers who are at community college, and they're very rarely at the more selective institutions. They're there at community colleges because they're still learning English. We need a lot of research on those students and what are their experiences in higher education?

So it's crucial and essential that people do this work, but it's also something that people can do. People can start small, they can get a small project, they can find somebody that can help them, they can get together with somebody who's already done research. And I want to say, if you're looking at doing a small research project, start with the scholarship of teaching and learning project related to the students at your institution and identify what do you need, what does your program need, to resolve and the problems that you have? That's how I started my initial work. We were looking at gaps we had for our students between our first semester first-year writing course on our second semester first-year writing course. That's where I would go first if you're thinking about what to write and how to do research and how to get into writing, is what do you need to do your teaching better? What does your program needs to better serve your students?