

Pedagogue Bonus: Ethics and Teaching Writing (w/Will Duffy)

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this bonus episode, I talk with Will Duffy about ethics and the teaching of writing.

Will Duffy is an Associate Professor and the Director of Graduate Studies in the English Department at the University of Memphis, where he teaches courses in writing, rhetoric, and technical communication.

Will, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your teaching and research interest include discourse ethics and religious rhetorics. I was hoping to give you some space to talk through this framework, or this lens, or how discourse ethics, and religious rhetorics influences and informs your approach to teaching. Maybe, you could also share some resources or some texts that have helped inform your approach to teaching language and literacy through this framework of ethics.

WD: Yeah, sure. Not a lot of people know this about me, but when I started graduate school, I had decided that I was either going to pursue an academic career studying rhetoric, so become a professor, or I would go get a Master of Divinity, and become a pastor somewhere. At the end of the day, both of those choices reflected my concern for how we talk to each other, and how we communicate, and, importantly, how we reflect on and engage with sort of what Burke might call those ultimate concerns that make a difference in our lives.

When I think about my scholarship, practically everything I write ultimately falls back on questions about the ethics that inform how we interact with one another. Actually, it's Wayne Booth's reading of Kenneth Burke's book, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, which is that one thing that Burke achieved, not just in that book, but over the course of his sort of prophetic career, as a thinker and writer. In Booth's words, it is about how serious rhetorical inquiry is inevitably wedded to genuine religion. Now, of course, I don't have the time to unpack that claim here, but I'll just say that one of the reasons I'm drawn to the study of religious rhetoric is because it's in such talk where we see most deliberately our attempts to materialize the empty immaterial, which is, well, I think in a lot of ways, a pretty good description of what rhetoric's function is if you think about it.

When it comes to my teaching, I'll simply echo something that I wrote in an *Inside Higher Ed* op-ed from a couple weeks ago, which is that I believe our students are whole human beings, who deserve to be treated as such, which means I want them to use whatever experiences they choose to engage and experiment with in writing that can help them and us sort of better know what we think, which in turn, gets us one step closer to engaging with pragmatism's maxim to examine the consequences of our ideas, which I think, in turn, gets us to a place where we can change our ideas, amend our ideas, let them grow, and develop.

Until we can do that sort of meta critical work, I think teaching students about rhetoric in the abstract, so memorizing rhetorical fallacies, filling out charts with the rhetorical triangle, understanding the difference between logos, ethos, and pathos, all of that is just busy work that aspires to teaching but never really gets there, in my opinion. The idea of a rhetoric textbook to me is just antithetical to what a rhetorical education is supposed to do. Yeah, I think like, again, I'm just ultimately drawn to those concerns that, at the end of the day, lead us to question.

It kind of falls back onto Kenneth Burke's distinction between identification and division. Why are we divided in the ways that we are, in these particular contexts or situations? Is that division productive? Is the division the cause or the source of some other difficulty that we have to work out? Again, I just think so much comes back down to how we engage with words, and with language, and with our relationship to words and language. That's why I think I study religious rhetoric, but also why, I think again, whether I'm writing about collaboration, or I'm writing about virtue ethics, or I'm writing about how we teach information literacy to first-year college students.

At the end of the day, like those ultimate concerns are always rooted in questions about how we relate to one another, and how we communicate those relations, and where those relations are pointed. My doppelganger, John Duffy, who I'm just going to call my uncle, even though he is not. I love John, but his new book on virtue ethics, I think, is really a good place to start where you can kind of see some of this thinking. Kind of coincidentally, we both started writing about virtue ethics around the same time. The very first thing I ever published was a book chapter about virtue ethics and the teaching of writing back in 2011. We've had sort of a healthy conversation about how writing teachers can use the classroom to sort of engage in questions related to ethos in new and productive ways.

Virtue ethics always asked the question, not whether or not something is right or wrong, but instead you put the agent front and center, and you say, "In this situation, what kind of person do I want to be? What kind of person do I aspire to be?" Then, you use that as sort of the starting point for asking questions. I've dropped this word several times in this conversation with you, Shane, but pragmatism is incredibly important to me, as a philosophical orientation. I can't tell you how influential William James is and his book of lectures on pragmatism has been and continues to be for me. George Herbert Mead, who is an incredibly abstract writer and thinker. Once you can get past the challenge of his prose, I think, really, really shows us really kind of important ideas about the way that language is paralogic, and the way that we, in community, kind of create meanings.

He articulates what I think is a pluralistic theory of language that underscores the relative nature of all of our interactions, without necessarily getting himself into a corner where he can be called a relativist in that sort of postmodern sense. That's where I would start. In composition, read anything that John Duffy has been writing. Then, go back and read some pragmatists. I mean, an incredibly important writer in that sort of era of sort of when pragmatism was really kind of in vogue in the early 20th century, a writer who was really important to those of us who live in Memphis is Ida B Wells. I think she's a great model of what pragmatic thinking can do and be as a way of activism. I think I would bring people to her, as well.