

Episode 43: Rebecca S. Nowacek

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

I've been thinking a lot here recently about how much this podcast has grown and how many different contributors have been on it since May 2019 when Pedagogue first launched. I'm constantly amazed and thankful by the attention Pedagogue has received in the rhetoric and composition community. I find a lot of joy teaching writing. I also find a lot of joy listening to others talk about teaching writing. So thanks for tagging along and listening to these conversations and using the podcast in your writing programs and classes, using it to think more closely about your own pedagogies and practices. If you ever want to chat or reach out and make a suggestion about the podcast, go to our website www.pedagoguepodcast.com – and fill out the contact form. I'd love to hear from you.

In this episode, I talk with Rebecca S. Nowacek about writing centers, cultivating and sustaining success in writing center work, advantages of co-directing a writing center, threshold concepts, and developing peer tutors.

Rebecca S. Nowacek is a Professor of English at Marquette University, where she co-directs the Ott Memorial Writing Center. She is the author of *Agents of Integration: Understanding Transfer as a Rhetorical Act*, and her work has also appeared in *CCC*, *College English*, and *RTE*. Her chapter in *Naming What We Know*, co-authored with Brad Hughes, received the IWCA Outstanding Article award. Rebecca was a Carnegie Scholar with the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and a recipient of Marquette's Gettel Faculty Award for Teaching Excellence.

Rebecca, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You've been a Writing Center director for nine years. What do you find most fulfilling about your work?

RN: There are so many things. I love, love, love Writing Center work. I really do. So we could spend all of our time talking about what's fulfilling in this work, most on my mind right now is the pleasure of working with the students who are our tutors. Some of them take the tutor education class in spring of their junior year so I get to work with them for that semester and two more, but many of them take it...I meet them in an interview in their first semester of college, they take the class as a first year student, and then I worked with them for seven semesters, and it is a privilege. It is a pleasure to watch these students grow and blossom and try things out and fail with some things and knock other things out of the park.

Being a writing tutor isn't necessarily listed as one of the high impact practices that you know are batted about in university talk, but I stand by it. Being a peer writing tutor as an undergraduate is I think potentially a profoundly transformative experience. I see it, we do exit interviews and many of our tutors talk about that.

I should say, we're mostly an undergraduate staffed writing center, but we also have a handful of truly fantastic graduate students who do extraordinary work in it. It's a great pleasure to work with and alongside of them and see them really growing as leaders and scholars, so that's one part of it. Another pleasure is I really like the work myself. I try as much as I can to keep on even if it's just a couple of hours here and there as our writing center is...I used to keep at least a shift or two on the schedule myself and as our writing center has grown over the past eight or so years, that's been increasingly difficult to do, but I do still work with writers coming into our writing center. And it's a tremendous pleasure to learn about why people want to go to dental school or what they're working on in this capstone in their physician assistant's studies program or whatever. It's intellectually demanding and horizon expanding work. Just as somebody who gets to talk with writers from all different disciplines.

A great site for research, I'm interested in studying and learning more about transfer of learning. It's a brilliant site for research on that subject. So that's another pleasure and there are more, but I would maybe limit myself to a fourth, which is there is something deeply gratifying about being able to try to be a nimble program in our university, to try to build different kinds of programs that speak to the needs of our campus or the broader Milwaukee community. And to be able to work with our office of admissions, to run workshops for area high school students who are writing college application essays and we hope that maybe they want to come to Marquette, but many of them end up in other places.

But being in conversation with these young students on a Saturday morning, they show up at 8:30am or something, extraordinary for high school students. And being able to build that with our undergraduate tutors as one example of the kinds of ways in which the administrative...sure, there are lots of reports that need to be generated and forms that need to be filled out and I don't mind doing that because the other part of the job is being able to build programming that seems to fill a real need and that's pleasurable in ways that I maybe even didn't anticipate.

SW: One thing I think is really great about writing center work is the ability to cultivate and sustain relationships over time. You mentioned the opportunity to work with some tutors for seven semesters. That's just so unique compared to working with students for one or two semesters in first-year writing.

RN: It is. The research tells us, and anecdotally I know, lots of people get to associate professor and they feel burned out. They feel exhausted. They feel let down, and I think that you wouldn't be, if you got to work with the students I got to work with in the ways that I get to work with them. All of us have bad semesters, any student can be in your course and having a bad moment, but to be able to spend more time with them, you really see the peaks and the valleys and how they come out on the other side.

SW: What has surprised you the most about being a Writing Center director?

RN: This is particularly on my mind on the heels of all these exit interviews that I did with graduating seniors. I'm thinking about how much administrative work matters and constantly I feel like I have to...not reinvent my principles, I think my principles are pretty strong and

constant, but the practice of it is constantly in progress. I know I've always believed that it's really important to have collaborative, transparent principles that guide our approach to writing program administration. I've had such great role models in this. I was a graduate tutor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where I got to work with Brad Hughes, who was extraordinary in so many ways, including both how capacious his conversations about writing across campus could be. And also so profoundly humane in the way that he would listen to people and remember things that you said and the names of the people in your family that you care about and your dog.

He was such a great model of both the scope of the ambition and how focused you need to be on the people you're working with in order to do that in a sustainable and humane way. Kris Radcliffe was my senior colleague here at Marquette for many years and I learned so much from her about transparent, inclusive processes and how those are not just in what we say our values are, but how it plays out in committee work. And just seeing it on a daily basis was so powerful and I'm really so fortunate now I have a fantastic co-director in Jenn Fishman, my colleague, and we've moved into co-directing in the last year, year and a half. It has been such an extraordinary pleasure. It has always been the case ever since Jenn came to Marquette. I always say that all my synapses fire when I'm in conversation with Jenn. I think about more ambitious projects and better ways to achieve them.

But all of that I think is...I've always known I've always had great models of how collaborative and transparent the work needs to be and yet I am surprised by all the things that I don't know about how to make that happen. Like when I started directing a writing center, I thought, "Wow, I don't know much about management." I'm making these air quotes and so I try to find all of these books. I listen to...I found the "Ask a Manager" column and the podcast is discontinued, but there was this fantastic Ask a Manager...

The tutors will be fantastic partners if you invite them into the conversations and really mean it. If you just shut up long enough to listen to what they're telling you about what they need and what writers might need, where the mismatch between your intention and how things played out was. I learned that through exit interviews...we have changed so many things about the way the Writing Center is organized and runs mentoring and various transitions. We have something called "leadership team" and the structure of that adjusts depending on what we learned from people. I don't know. All of this is a really long-winded way of saying that in some sense I'm not surprised in the big picture, but I'm constantly surprised about how much, all of your little choices, all the administrative details matter for making our ideals of collaborative, transparent decision-making and administrative work. How much it matters for making that the lived experience for everybody who's in the writing center. Do they feel respected and included in the work?

SW: Do you mind talking about co-directing a writing center and the advantages to that collaboration?

RN: Jenn and I had a conversation the other day where I said, "Well, once again, let me say how much the quality of my life has improved by having somebody to share, frankly, a bunch of the grunt work that..." Our graduate student assistant directors also do tremendous work, but there's

a fair amount of turnover there, and we're a PhD program in literature rather than in writing studies. On that level alone, it is beneficial. The real advantage and pleasure is to be able not only to do more, but to do it better. I think of Jenn as somebody who is really such a terrific collaborator in terms of having different and complimentary understandings of what the needs of our campus are and the potential for building partnerships and building programs in our campus and in our community. We're in conversation a lot. We figured out that in addition to all of our little on the fly conversations, we really benefit from having longer, more scheduled conversations at the beginning of semesters and the beginning of weeks.

It's really interesting to model it and make it clear for the whole of our staff. On the one hand we try to sort of divvy up some things so I'm taking the lead on some things and Jenn's taking the lead on other things. But it's not like we've divided it up into fiefdoms, like this is my part and that's her part. It's very collaborative and helping people who are in staff and actually also in our university, trying to put that out there as a model. Not of one person reporting like, "Well, who's the real director?" We're both the real director, "There's really a lot going on." And there aren't a ton of models for it.

SW: Your co-authored chapter in Naming What We Know titled "Threshold Concepts in Writing Center Work" centralizes and takes up the question as to how threshold concepts can be used to inform and develop tutor preparation and training. How do threshold concepts better prepare or equip writing center tutors?

RN: I have been fortunate enough to write about that at two different moments in time. In the initial *Naming What We Know* book, I had the opportunity to co-author with Brad Hughes and really think about various ways in which threshold concepts might be meaningful in terms of making threshold concepts of writing central to tutor education. But then also thinking about, "Are there threshold concepts that are essential to being a peer tutor of writing?" And one of the things that we got to articulate in that chapter is something that Brad had been talking about for a long time, which is the idea of the expert outsider instead of embracing that as a way of moving through a conversation, but also kind of being in the world.

It was really interesting to talk through and think through that. I redesigned my tutor education course around the idea of threshold concepts of writing. And then a number of years later, I had the opportunity to work with a number of the undergraduates. In our writing center we have something...we're really fortunate our university funds us some Mellon money, and we have something called the WRITE Fellows Program. It's an acronym, Writing and Research Integrative Tutor Experience. So these WRITE fellows are undergraduate tutors who then are paid a small stipend to work on a research project together as a team. We actually went back and looked at this team of tutors, went back and looked at sort of how members of our staff seem to be grappling with threshold concepts over time. We had people doing writing and drawing pictures about their sort of recollections of threshold concepts and did a number of follow-up interviews with people.

And one of the things that really came through was that those threshold concepts of writing really served people differently at different moments in their trajectory of professional development. Some of those threshold concepts of writing seemed so obvious to people in the

course at first and some they really wrestled with, and of course the experience was different for various tutors. One of the things that didn't quite surprise us, but was really striking to us was often several semesters after the course, right after they finished the tutor education course, they could name all the threshold concepts and the further away they got, of course, the less able that they seem to go back to the title of the original book, to "Name What We Know." They were maybe less able to articulate them, but in an interview when asked, they've seemed to have internalized many of them quite deeply, that they found that they really informed their practice.

And what I'm about to say is maybe grounded more anecdotally than in clear empirical research, but I think they're so powerful for our staff as a kind of shared vocabulary. Just as a framework for thinking, there are things that undergird our work that are troublesome and transformative, and we all wrestle with them, all of us. All of us tutors. All of us writers. All of the instructors who are giving assignments that bring writers to the Writing Center. We are all wrestling with those in our different ways. And we have experiences that sometimes give us an aha moment. We have some experiences where we say, "This doesn't make any sense with how I thought writing in the world worked."

But to give our staff a sort of shared vocabulary with that, and also I think that those threshold concepts of writing also help us to be a little more empathetic, a little more humane. Somebody does not seem to be getting the thing that seems so obvious to you. If threshold concepts is part of our basic orientation towards this work, then maybe we understand that what has already been transformative to us is still troublesome to somebody else.

SW: So I know your research also focuses on reading and writing in the STEM disciplines. Can you talk about this research and how reading practices in the STEM disciplines can inform writing across the curriculum?

RN: So this research that we're talking about is really part of...it's deeply informed by my ongoing collaboration with my marvelous colleague, Heather James, who was at the time a research librarian who was working with English and the STEM disciplines. She was the liaison for departments in the humanities and various scientific disciplines. She's now the coordinator of our scholarly communications and digital programs. But at that moment, we were working closely together with... the library had, of course, embedded librarians and we developed a program called "course embedded tutors." We decided to piggyback on their language, and it's much like the writing fellows programs that some writing centers run.

So we were in extended collaboration with faculty in experimental genetics and engineering and various other disciplines. And we really had an opportunity to think about how it was...in particular, we were working with a lot of students on learning to write literature reviews and that gave us so many opportunities to be in conversation with students about how they were finding and reading and writing about, and then realizing they needed to reread and perhaps find more sources. Being in conversation with them really nudged us to go look at what do we know about how professionals in these disciplines read texts and there are some really good, really helpful research that gave us ways of thinking about how do we try to model for. In our positions, also in conversation with instructors, trying to help them think about that are the ways in which you read and write as a professional.

I had a conversation this last academic year with somebody who's in physics and she's asked to teach a first year writing course, and we had a really fun conversation where I was asking her, "Well, how do you read?" If you're trying to teach your students how to read, let's talk about how you read and how you write. And you don't read linearly. The existence of that research helped me to ask this instructor better and probably more pointed questions about what her own practices are. And then honestly, we're back to some of the threshold concepts ideas "Well, okay. If that's how you learned, if that's how you read and write as a professional physicist, how'd you learn to do that? What were some of the things that were hard? What are the things that you could invite students to do that would help them along that road?"

When I'm in conversation with writers in the STEM disciplines, I often find myself going to two things that I absolutely heisted from other people. I think it's Brad Hughes who would say that the research university runs on writing. And then in a somewhat more pointed way, a friend of mine from high school who's an engineer and runs an enormously large program, he used to say to me, "Well, you should feel good about what you're doing, because I can tell you, there are two kinds of engineers. There are engineers who write well, and there are engineers who work for the engineers who right well."

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