

Episode 119: Rebecca Weaver

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

Pedagogue is a podcast that amplifies teacher-scholar perspectives on teaching writing across contexts and positions and celebrates the labor teachers do inside and outside the classroom. Each episode is a conversation with a teacher or multiple teachers about classroom pedagogies and practices. Teachers talk about their experiences teaching writing, their work, inspirations, assignments, assessments, successes, and challenges. Please feel free to subscribe on whatever platform you're listening on.

In this episode, Rebecca Weaver talks about building writing adaptability and fostering community in the writing classroom, teaching at Perimeter College outside Atlanta, and the hidden curriculum.

Rebecca Weaver is an Associate Professor of English at Georgia State University-Perimeter College, a new columnist at the *National Teaching and Learning Forum*, and has written about teaching for *Inside Higher Ed*, *The Chronicle's* "ProfHacker," *Recursive*, and *TechStyle*. She is the founding editor of *Recursive Reviews*, and is a new pedagogy developer, working as a GSU CETLOE Faculty Fellow in 2022-2023. Her website is talkingteachingwriting.com, and you can find her on twitter [@WeaverRew](https://twitter.com/WeaverRew). When she's not teaching, talking about teaching, or writing and reading about teaching, she's walking, gardening, cooking, or reading.

Rebecca, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your approach to teaching focuses on adaptability and community. What are some ways you build this into the classroom and foster community in the writing classroom at Georgia State University-Perimeter College?

RW: Well, over the last seven years or so since I've come to Perimeter, which for people who don't know Perimeter College was a standalone community college that had five campuses plus an online campus. We were merged with Georgia State University in 2016. The process began in 2015, but it's still ongoing in some ways. I still consider where I teach a community college, even though we're a college now within a larger university. That has a major impact in how I think about what I do. I've really drilled it down into this one major concept that my job is to help my students develop a writing process that helps them adapt to any writing situation. That's it, that's the whole story of the class. And there are lots of different ways that I try to do that.

I begin the class often by talking about my grandfather's garage. It was so full of tools that he didn't even park the car in it. And yet every tool had its place. Every surface was neatly laid out. You knew exactly what went where, and neighbors would ask him, "Oh, could you fix my

lawnmower? Could you fix my window casing or whatever.” And he had the exact right tools to do the job. I tell my students...I give them this idea of the toolbox as a metaphor for their writing process. We talk a lot about what a writing process looks like. Keith Hjortshoj, in his great book, *The Transition to College Writing*, he talks about the false ideas, or the bad ideas, if you want to say, about writing that he sees a lot of students have. One of the big ones is that writing is a linear process. Write, draft, turn it in.

I talk a lot about what a good and healthy writing process means. It means you adapt, you are able to get a writing assignment from your psychology prof and know what to do. I can't tell you exactly what to do, but if you have a good writing process, you'll be able to approach that project. Of course, I talk about it as a puzzle to solve, and I like that a lot. So that's the adaptability part of it. I also feel like because there's no such thing as standardized students and students are not standardizable, I'm adapting. I'm adapting to who my students are and what they need every semester. Of course with the last couple of years, it's had some new layers I'll say. So that's the adaptability part.

The community part – I try to build community in the classroom through all kinds of things that we probably have all heard of. Peer review, sharing things. But I do ungrading as assessment in my writing classes. A big part of the building of the community happens when the students sit down and talk to each other about, “Well, what does it mean to get a B in this class or to get an A in a writing class?” What does it mean to attend most of the time? What does it mean to be engaged in the class? And a lot of that community building gets accelerated in that conversation, which is usually around the fourth or fifth week of the semester because then they're holding each other accountable and they're the ones who've created the stakes for what that means. They've now gotten to know each other a little bit. They hold each other accountable for the work of the class.

In my 1102 classes, so in Georgia, all the students have to take a year sequence of two semesters of composition. And in 1102 where we focus on not just building a good writing process, but also thinking about the history and current state of higher education, they write a profile of somebody else in the class. They write an academic profile, and we do work ahead of that...in a couple of weeks ahead of that on the idea of the “academic self” from educational psychologist Aronson. So we talk about this idea of an academic self. They have to write a profile of somebody else's academic self. Again, they've got to know somebody...they have had a conversation with somebody about their academic ideas. I get the sense that has not happened for many of my first-year students until that day. So that's another way that I work on building community in my writing classrooms.

SW: Rebecca, let's talk more about your unique context, historically, a two-year college and now this merger with Georgia State University. How has your teaching changed, or has it stayed the same? Perimeter is also outside of Atlanta, Georgia. How is your teaching influenced by where you are and who your students are?

RW: There's a few ways I've been thinking about this question. First is to think about, "Well, what do we mean when we say community college?" I had the great experience to teach at a couple of community colleges up in Minnesota before moving down here and really realized that that is where I wanted to be even though I wasn't sure how I was gonna get there. I really loved it. Part of the reason was because traditionally at community colleges, it's not students who were told that they were heading to college, it's students who had to fight to really be there and still have to fight in many cases to be in that classroom. And who may have spent a few years or a few decades outside of school and are coming back because they've really made the decision I want to be here.

There's that kind of angle of it. When I first got this job at Perimeter, my father-in-law wrote to me, and he is involved in politics in Minnesota and was friends with the late Paul Wellstone. Wellstone would every couple of years kind of threaten to not run again. They'd say, "Well, what would you do?" He'd say, "Well, I'd go teach at the community college." And then somebody would invariably sort of say, "Well, Paul, you could have your pick of any college to teach at why teach at a community college?" And he would say, "Because I feel like I can do the most good there." You know, it was my father-in-law's way of congratulating me, which I thought was just incredibly touching obviously.

That always strikes me, especially after having experiences of teaching at big state universities, small liberal arts colleges. I taught in an arts college in Minneapolis, which was a blast. I mean, they were all very different and all very interesting like at Georgia Tech, which is this premier science and engineering school. I really feel like my pedagogical home is at a community college, even though we're part of a state school, and we're still trying to figure out what all that means because pedagogically, our traditions are very different in some ways. That relationship is still pretty new. I turned in my application for Georgia Perimeter and the next day is when they announced that they would become part of Georgia State. My life at the school has always been the merger. It's been weird. I've never had that before. It's the 10th school that I've taught at.

SW: 10 schools. Who has informed your pedagogy the most, and how so? What teachers or scholars have influenced your approach to teaching and in what ways have they done so?

RW: Yeah, I feel really lucky that I have had this great range of experiences. I think probably my first influence, the person who first said to me, "You know, this is something you might want to think about doing – teaching college." A couple of my professors said that, but I'd love to call out by name Dr. Pauline Beard, who was my professor that ran the training for the writing tutors and at that point was my alma mater Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon. Go Boxers! My alma mater didn't have a writing center. Instead, we had tutors that were part of the res-life staff in each dorm. We were called house tutors and Pauline ran that training. It was my first ever training as a writing teacher and a lot of what she had to do still resonates with me and helped me when...I've worked in three different writing centers. So that helped a lot in grad school as I'm sure, you know. I did two different kinds of grad schools. I did an MFA in poetry, and then I did a PhD in literature. But in traditional grad school, in the humanities, there isn't a lot of emphasis

or love for pedagogy training or enthusiasm. For a long time, I felt like I had this split identity, somebody who was trying to do the literature research and I was participating in the community as a poet. That was fun and great and amazing. But I also knew...because I knew people who were already in teaching jobs at community colleges, I did some adjuncting when I was in grad school, I already knew that most of my time as a professor would be teaching. Yet I was at this kind of major research university doing my PhD where those were not the messages I was hearing.

In fact, I was being very explicitly told not to pay attention to teaching and not to put much work into it. Yet I loved it so much. I'll tell you a story. I got laryngitis, I had a cold and then it turned into laryngitis and I thought, "Well, I feel fine." I went in and thought, this was still, gosh, this would've been early 2000s. So we still had overheads. Right? What I did is I set up the screen in such a way that I had the notes on the overhead next to where I was writing, what I would usually say on the white board. I would use a lot of gestures and get the students involved...and I kinda led class that way. Then I wrote, "Okay, we're done. See you Monday." And this kid stands up and claps and I was like, "Hey, I might really be good at this. This might be fun. I could see maybe just doing this."

As much as I learned, as much as I tried to publish stuff about my scholarship, poetry in the 1970s, I also was kind of developing this other part, this interest in teaching. I got to teach a class in kind of American educational history, late in my graduate school career. Read Freire for the first time and Mike Rose. You know, *Lives on the Boundary* and all kinds of great stuff. Myles Horton, right? The Highlander School founder. Like all these amazing people and was kind of like, "I think I've been doing this liberatory critical pedagogy stuff." And then started to be introduced to some of these ideas. When I was teaching composition in the same school where I was at, they are separate departments but they had...because they have a huge number of composition classes I started to teach. I was starting to have some of these conversations.

Then, I became a Britain fellow at Georgia Tech and that's what lit the fire. I started to get to know former Brits, like Jesse Stommel, who founded Digital Pedagogy Lab with Sean Michael Morris. And I ended up going to that and teaching a class there and getting to know a huge amount of people, all kinds of people. Also folks like Cathy Davidson, who I've never actually met in person, but who's been deeply influential about my thinking, not just about what we do in the humanities, but about the weight of history of academic teaching and how much ground we still have yet to cover. I love having my students watch her talk about Charles Eliot. I think it's so much fun and about the history of grades as meat packing history, right?

It's so much fun. But also, you know, like Saundra McGuire and Dr. Steven Chou, people who talk to other teachers about teaching, it's amazing what's out there. All kinds of folks on Twitter, like Twitter's been an amazing teaching and pedagogy community. For me, it has been life sustaining, affirming, and I'm just so grateful for the community that people have created. Even though we have disagreements at times, or we argue about stuff, I never would've found resources like *Bad Ideas About Writing*, which is central to my composition pedagogy now. I've

stolen their title, well I gave them credit for my column at the *National Teaching and Learning Forum*. You know, so many folks, Rebecca Moore Howard was one of my very first influences around how we think about and teach about source use. And I will quote her every single time somebody says, “Why don't you use Turnitin?” “Well, in the citation project, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” I could keep going and just give you a list of names.

SW: You've written about this idea of the “hidden curriculum” and the effects it has on students. Can you talk more about what the hidden curriculum is and how you have conversations with students about how to navigate the university, and why you think that's important for teachers to consider doing?

RW: The hidden curriculum is this concept again from educational psychology, but also educational historians and other folks who work a lot with first generation students or students for whom maybe they've had a parent in college or near college, but there may have been some life events that created a kind of distance between them and academic culture. I think poverty is definitely one of those things. That was true for me. Both my mother and father went to college, but growing up in a poor neighborhood is very different and culturally trains things in you differently than say the more suburban neighborhood, closer to the high school down the way, right? It's this concept that basically says there is a whole host of things behaviorally, academically, culturally, that students get assessed on and judged for, but are never told that.

And the never told that, that's the hidden part. And it's all kinds of things like how to email your professor, don't call your professor “dude.” Right? I think of the *Chronicle* series “Dear Student,” a lot of that is hidden curriculum stuff. It's done in a pretty, I think negative way...in a way that I don't find useful or compassionate or frankly interesting because it's essentially yelling at students for what they don't know. And honestly, for fuck's sakes we are teachers. We teach. I try to make what's hidden, I try to make that transparent. I talk about it. I say, “Okay, here's another lesson in the hidden curriculum, guys. Let's talk about how to email your professors or what are office hours? What does that mean? And why should you go to them?” I have so many students for whom approaching a teacher has been drilled out of them.

There's a regional high school here who tells their students, don't ask your professors for help. They don't want to help you. And I have to say, “No, no, no, your professors will help you. If you come see us in our offices and come talk to us and come email us.” So there's all kinds of academic hidden curriculum things. I think we've probably seen some of this as graduate students not knowing some of the cultural morays and cultural expectations, shall we say? In my classes and I make it an explicit part of the curriculum, “Here's what you need to know about how to navigate this community, this academic community and become part of it. Even if you aren't really into it for a while, fake it till you make it. Here's how to look like you're on top of your game. Here's how to get ahold of your professors. Here's how to say that here are expectations around, say assignment submission. A lot of your professors are already gonna assume you know this and this and this and that's wrong, but you need to know that and be ready for it.”

I feel like I do a lot of like cultural coaching in some ways. There are great resources now out there for students. There's a book for mentoring students through the hidden curriculum that I've read some and there's lots of folks, especially folks working with first generation students. I mean, folks who've been working with first generation students have known this for a long time. You know, it's the rest of us that have been working with them, but not in the roles of say advisors or student success folks or counselors, right. Professors have been a little late to that, but are starting to pick it up. A colleague and I talked about pitching a class just on the hidden curriculum of college. Just all kinds of ways you talk about yourself as a student, to how you deal with professors, to how you format a paper.

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