Episode 122: Rebekah Bennetch
Pedagogue podcast
Transcript

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

In this episode, Rebekah Bennetch talks about teaching at the University of Saskatchewan in the school of professional development, technical communication, open educational resources, on grading and trauma-informed teaching practices.

Rebekah Bennetch is a lecturer at the University of Saskatchewan, where she teaches technical communication courses in the Graham School of Professional Development housed in the College of Engineering. Rebekah is also a doctoral student about to start her dissertation as part of a cross disciplinary education program. Her research interests include learning about trauma-informed teaching practices, implementing rapport, building strategies in the classroom, and using narrative inquiry methods to relate to fellow faculty in the time outside the classroom and her studies. Rebekah likes to talk to other educators on Twitter. You can follow her @grrlmeetsworld.

Rebekah, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Let's talk about your institutional context and approach to teaching. What's it like teaching at the University of Saskatchewan and the School of Professional Development?

RB: Well, in many ways I'm a bit of a transplant, both in a personal and professional context. First of all, I'm American, but I'm also Canadian. I initially moved here to Saskatoon from Savannah, Georgia back in 2002, and I initially came to graduate school up here. I've been on faculty now in the college of engineering since 2006, which is where I'm the other transplant. I'm a humanities person in a technical college. Usually, whenever I introduce myself as a lecturer in the college, I usually follow up by explaining that I'm not an engineer; I actually teach technical communication courses and public speaking courses in this college. Now that said, there's no other department where I'd rather work on campus. I always say, give me a skeptical engineering student any day because I can persuade them how communication can help empower them to be even more efficient in their work.

I use the discipline of rhetoric to teach technical communication, a required course in this college. I teach engineering students and students from the College of Agriculture in our school, the School of Professional Development, as you mentioned. It's funded in part by two of our successful alumni, Ron and Jane Graham. Ron Graham in particular is a past civil engineering student. He likes to fund our school to help us teach our students these principles of rhetorical communication and how it applies to their fields of technical sciences. And, you know, it's funny, most of my students come to class on the first day, not knowing what to expect in my technical communication course, other than the fact that it's a required course they have to take for so many of them. There's an anxiety around the process of communication and they don't understand the point. They'd rather be in a lab class or in a math class, but usually by the end of the term, I'm able to persuade them to see how this rhetorical relational approach to

communication is this effective tool that's going to help them to enhance these technical things that they want to say. I've been teaching this course every term since 2004. And I sat down and I actually tallied how many times I've taught this course, and I've taught it over 80 times, which is a lot. But what I love about is every time I teach a section, it's a little bit different of a classroom experience because I know my students' life experiences and contributions will bring a whole new element to the experience. So that's just a little bit about where I'm coming from in terms of my context here at the US.

SW: Rebekah, let's peel back the layers of that technical communication class and teaching in the School of Professional Development and the College of Engineering. How do you approach this course pedagogically and what are some texts and assignments or activities you use?

RB: Well, when I think about it, the job of teaching technical communication, whether it's in the written or oral capacity, it's a really meta kind of job to teach because it requires me to not only teach communication, but to be a good communicator while teaching them communication. So if I think about it too much, it may make my head explode just a little bit. Usually, I can really feel it acutely, especially when I'm talking to them about public speaking and I'm emphasizing to them the need to have gestures, recognizing the fact that I need to use gestures while telling them about the need to use gestures.

But that said, I think the whole meta quality too, I also apply to my own personal pedagogy because I think being reflexive is a quality that I want to have as an instructor but is also something that I think my students need to have as technical communicators. And for me to be the teacher that I want to be, it requires me to reflect about who I am in the classroom, and I think that this is a foundational quality to my practice. And since the pandemic, I feel like I've given myself a bit more of this permission slip to be the teacher that I want to be, which is someone who's motivated to be more of a mentor with my students versus the expert or sage on the stage. And this pandemic has really showed me so many inequitable institutional systems. And I see my job as an instructor is to be one that empowers students to help them to teach themselves. I see really teaching as an invitation for students. So granted they're in my class because it's a required course, but I want to pitch technical communication as an invitation for students to take advantage of at whatever level that they want to engage with those materials. And so it's more about me meeting students where they're at versus me assuming I know what's best for them. To do this means I'm going to be reflecting and growing along with them as they're learning this material.

One project in particular that I did during the pandemic that I'd really like to talk about is an open educational resource textbook that we designed for our course. Actually, the book came out of a really bad experience online. We all remember the spring of 2020 when so many of us were forced to go to these emergency remote classrooms. We had just a few days to take our course and put it onto Blackboard and I can safely say it was a terrible experience. It was a horrific experience, but we were able to take some lessons from that experience and use it to design our textbook. And so, our technical communication textbook is a book that's free, it's available to all of our students, but what's great about it is it's customized, with this idea of being an invitation for students to engage with the material in a number of ways.

So yes, of course, there's definitely textual material for them to sort through and in terms of a traditional content. But we've also designed it to get students to engage with the content in a number of other ways. We've written case studies where students can see how students apply some of the course concepts in real life, so hopefully they can start to make those connections in their own head about what these principles of communication, rhetorical communication look like in a technical context. We've got quizzes that will help them to quickly check the material that they just read and even interactive YouTube videos that will get them to pause and reflect on what they've just seen. And again, it is open to students to embrace this text at whatever level that they want to come at.

But as a teacher, I also find that this OER text is a great instructional tool because it allows me to customize my content for my students. And I can literally tell them, "I wrote this book for you. Go to Chapter 29, and you're going to see exactly the help that you're going to need for that assignment." And not only that, I love the philosophy behind this open approach to sharing information because this motivation to share resources and spread information quickly is so helpful for us teachers in this pandemic age. And I really hope that teachers can take this material and use it for your own good, because it really helps to make the process a little bit less daunting.

Really, the essential idea of what I teach students in my class is that when we communicate, it's all about these connections, these relationships that we're building, and it doesn't matter how technical we are in the content that we're describing. We have to recognize we're communicating to human beings and that because of that, we have to be careful with how we position the way we communicate with others. So, I think that we have to think about all these different elements in the classroom. And I think that this relational element is what's key and crucial here.

SW: I'm interested in hearing more about your approach to assessment. I know you take an alternative approach to assessment—ungrading. Can you talk more about how and why you use ungrading and maybe even how your students respond?

RB: I think, again, the pandemic really shook things up for so many of us in the classroom. I think for a lot of us, it really required us to have some of these gut checks of why am I doing what I'm doing, is it actually working, and is it helpful? You're right, I am a little bit more attracted to some of these more non-traditional methods of assessing students, because again, if I'm pitching the notion of technical communication as an invitation for students to embrace, I need to recognize that the process of assessment needs to be more of a collaborative act versus an act that's more of a ranking and filing of students into a certain type of order. I also recognize too, that if I'm not careful as a teacher, it's so easy for me to fall into the trap of just grading the way I was graded.

I kind of want to be pushing myself to find these ways to meet students where they're at, which requires me to find these different models of ways to reach out to students. I want to be able to see assessment as an act that is negotiated and collaborated with my students versus something that just happens to them. I actually want them to own some of this process. One thing that I've done to implement some of these more alternative methods is that I now offer a submission policy for almost all of my assignments, except for some of the more summative ones, like final

exams and things like that. And what I offer to students is they have an unlimited amount of time that they can redo an assignment, but there's always a catch. And here's the catch.

The catch is that I want them to give me a one to two paragraph reflection on what they've changed in this assignment. But the key thing is, is why do they make these changes? Because I really want them to understand that the process of writing is iterative, and you might not get it right the first time. But if you take that shot to think about it and understand why a comma splice is not going to help you get your message across, it's not just the grammatical mistake, but what that mistake means to the meaning of your message. I want them to make those connections. And then I tell my students, "I'm willing to take the extra work of marking your assignment." Because I think it's important for them to recognize that it is extra work for me to do, to mark this assignment. But if they're willing to take that extra incentive to show me that they've made those connections, I'm willing to do it.

And for the first time in my career, I can say I've had students thank me for failing them. And the reason why is because they were able to see that the feedback I gave them on why they failed an assignment and the opportunity to redo it and reclaim that assignment really promotes that growth mindset. And, and honestly it fuels me as a teacher and I've yet to be burned by this assignment policy because it is extra work. But honestly it fuels me as a teacher to see students take advantage of this growth opportunity. Selfishly speaking as a teacher, when I hand back assignments that I know some of them might be upset about, I don't have to worry about the sad, angry eyes I might see in their faces because it's an invitation.

If they want to take advantage of a resubmission, they can do it. But if they don't take advantage of it, then I can also be content with it. They're okay with that mark, I'm okay meeting them where they're at. I don't have that extra pressure of achievement that I was feeling before when I had more of that traditional mindset of assessment being that ranking and filing of students.

So that's just a small way. And then for me, I think it's these small little changes that we can make. It didn't take much for me to ask for that quick reflection. It doesn't require me to overhaul my entire course. It just requires me to have a little bit more compassion and understanding and still have that a little bit of accountability for my students and that if they want to take advantage of this resubmission, they're going to have to do a little bit of extra work too.

SW: This is my last question. Your teaching and research are also connected to trauma-informed teaching practices. Can you talk more about these practices and your research?

RB: Well, I'm still very much learning about this, but again, taking that permission slip of the pandemic and being the teacher, to be that teacher means to recognize that my students are whole people. They're not just ahead of the brain on it. Students, like all of us, have been through a lot in these last two and a half years. For me, I'm by nature an empathetic person, and so I found, especially at the very beginning of the pandemic, it was really overwhelming because I felt like the emotional labor of the job got to be so much. That's where I kind of lean a little bit more on the work of Brené Brown; she talks about how, when extending compassion to someone, you also have to at the same time balance that out with accountability. For me, if I'm not careful, I

can skew too much to the account, to the compassion side where almost patronizing, but then if I overcorrect it and become too accountable, well then, I become a bit of a hard ass and that's not my teaching pedagogy at all. And so I'm trying to find again these little small fixes to kind of meet my students where they're at and to provide these opportunities, to let them know that I've got their back, I'm going to be able to support them if they, they need this kind of support.

One small little change that I like to talk about, that I like to encourage other educators to consider is what I call the 72 hours no questions asked policy. And what that is is I tell my students at any point in the term for any assignment, "If you need 72 hours to be able to work on that assignment, to have that extension, you can have it at any point, you can ask me at 11:59 PM, the night of that assignment's due and you have that extension." The thing is, I tell my students, "I just need you to just let me know, 'I need the extension.'" If you want to tell me why you can, but you don't have to. I don't need to know the reason, but I just need you to advocate for yourself that I need that 72 hours. You know that you have it, but it's not automatic. Like I need you just to say, "I need 72." I make that across the board. I don't make students have to have a onetime pass. It's for any assignment at any point. But I also recognize that students have to understand that it's not necessarily a given, but it's there if they need it.

I've had students take advantage of it the entire term, I've had students never take advantage of it. But I've had, anecdotally speaking, students have come up and really talk to me about how just knowing that they're able to have that in their back pocket was enough to get them to be able to push through that assignment. I tell them, "It's 72 hours for a reason. 72 hours gives you the night off. You can watch some bad Netflix, but then you've got to get back on that horse again. And you've got to be able to finish that assignment." I do want them to succeed, and in order to do that, I'm going to have to hold them accountable.

But I can still, as a teacher, show some compassion in that. And 72 hours is not that long of an extension, and it's not going to put me too far behind with my marking either. So, I find that it's a way for me to meet my students where they're at. I think as teachers and educators, finding these little fixes for us to be able to recognize some of the, the hard times that we've been through this last couple of years, these kinds of fixes aren't hard to do in our classroom. I hope to hear other ideas of how to better meet our students where they're at beyond just ways to communicate our instructional content to them.

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