

Episode 112: Ryan P. Shepherd

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

Pedagogue is designed to amplify teacher-scholar perspectives on teaching writing and composition across contexts and positions. The purpose of the podcast is to promote diverse voices at various institutions and celebrate the labor teachers do inside and outside the classroom. If you have a second, subscribe and follow us on whatever platform you're listening on, and if you like the podcast, please feel free to leave us a rating or a review. You can also find us online at pedagoguepodcast.com and on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

In this episode, Ryan P. Shepherd talks about teaching for transfer (TFT), a TFT approach for graduate composition classes, digital literacy and multimodality in first-year writing, and using Reddit in class to teach students about discourse communities.

Ryan P. Shepherd is the incoming Director of First-Year Composition and Associate Professor of English at Northern Illinois University. His work explores the connections between writing for school and writing outside of school, particularly on social media. His work has appeared in *Computers and Composition*, *Composition Studies*, *Kairos*, *Composition Forum*, and elsewhere. He is currently finishing work on a co-edited collection with Kara Poe Alexander, Matthew Davis, and Lilian Mina on multimodal composition and writing transfer, expected to be out later this year or early next.

Ryan, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You recently co-wrote an article in Composition Forum published in 2021 called "Beyond Osmosis: Developing Teaching for Transfer Pedagogy for Graduate Classes in Composition." You write, "Studies that explore theoretical approaches to graduate pedagogy beyond the practicum are rare. Those that rely on empirical approaches to evaluate these pedagogical methods do not seem to exist." I was hoping that we could start by giving you some space and time to talk more about this article, the motivations behind it, and what you hope readers and teachers will take from it.

RS: Yeah, the article is actually part of a two-part series. So there's an earlier one that was in Composition Studies. There was a curricular design article and both articles were written by mostly the same team, although one coauthor dropped out for the Composition Forum because he was writing his dissertation. Part of the motivation for writing the article was weirdly continuing what happened in the class. So the class is based around history and theories of composition, which is coincidentally a class I'm teaching again this semester. And what we were doing when we were doing the curricular design article was trying to actually engage in some of that learning transfer I was trying to get.

I got some of the students from the class and I got them to co-write the article, getting them to think specifically about how we do that better. If we were to redesign this curriculum, how would we get students to think about ways that they're connecting what they're learning in the class to their teaching or research or personal lives or wherever outside of the class. That was one of the motivations for it initially...was just taking that from my perspective, the obvious next step of, instead of just saying, "Here, let's reflect on ways that you can use what we're doing in the class in other contexts," let's actually do it. Let's actually use it in a different context.

And by the same token, it was a way to kind of apprentice those graduate students into scholarly writing because at the time that that first one was written, I don't think any of them had written a scholarly article before. So it was also just a way to do that. I always try to have at least one article that I'm currently working on that's co-written with graduate students for that reason. So it was also doing that, but of course there's also the additional scholarly reason that we're writing the article and that's to get it...a bigger issue that I've noticed in composition studies more broadly, which is that we do a lot of theorizing about undergraduate composition education, and we do almost none about graduate composition education beyond maybe the TA seminar. I mean, like sometimes there's some articles about the TA seminar or there's Sidney Dobrin's book that focuses on the TA seminar. But aside from that, there's just not that much. There's often this kind of assumption that graduate students will just get it. I mean, to an extent that's true. I think if you get to graduate school, you're probably already a good student. You're good at school.

And if you're good at school, that means that you probably have kind of an intuitive sense of making connections across contexts, that you're able to see the ways that something connects to other things. I think especially English studies people are a lot of times trained in means of analysis that work toward that kind of connection. So a lot of us, when we start teaching graduate school, teaching graduate classes, we have this assumption that we'll just show them the articles. We'll talk about them, and they'll get it. And that's all that needs to take place. So especially in that *Composition Forum* article, what we did was we went around, and we interviewed nine people that teach composition classes at the graduate level about the way they do it and the way that they try to build those connections.

And some of what we found was that none of them, none of the nine, mentions learning transfer explicitly, but they were all kind of engaging in it in certain ways. They were doing things to try to place the content of the class in research context or in teaching context, or sometimes in both. So they did have these activities and mechanisms that were set up to do that. It was pretty easy for us to find them that stuff because almost everybody mentioned it, almost without prompting, but people were not doing that intentionally. We're not, we're not intentionally trying to build that way of thinking into their classes. So the last question in the interviews, I did all those interviews, the last question of the interviews that I asked them was how does learning transfer factor into your graduate education?

Almost every time people were like, “Oh yeah,” meaning that they hadn't even thought about how it factors into their graduate education classes. It was kind of that thing. Part of the purpose of the article is getting people to just explicitly think about learning transfer when they're designing graduate education. Maybe to a larger extent trying to get scholars who teach graduate classes to just theorize about graduate education a little bit more, and maybe test out their pedagogy in the ways that we do with undergraduate education. I mean, we have so many pedagogies now where people have taken that more systematic approach where we have actually looked and assessed our pedagogy and seen whether or not we're meeting our outcomes. We just don't do that for graduate education. So that article also just kind of serves as a springboard for that conversation, which is hopefully something that I can return to in the future.

I'm hoping to come back to maybe talk to more graduate instructors about ways that we can build that out ways that we can explicitly try to work toward theories of graduate education and composition studies, instead of just relying on one of the interviewees that I had that called it “osmosis,” just assuming that it's going to happen. So trying to move beyond that idea of osmosis and trying to figure out different ways that we can do that, because I don't necessarily think that the adaptation that we did, the teaching for transfer model that we used for that article is the only possible model. I just think that it's one that seemed to be pretty effective based on what we did.

SW: You mentioned teaching this graduate course called the History and Theories of Composition. Do you mind talking more about this class and what it looks like to use a teaching for transfer approach? Maybe walk us through that model for graduate education?

RS: And so basically what I did was take the three main pillars from the teaching for transfer model that's used in undergraduate education, and I adapted it. I shifted it slightly to a graduate education model. So in the undergraduate version that Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak first started and now has been adapted across a bunch of other people...you start with keywords and you add in reflection and you build to a theory of writing. Those are the three pillars. I did that same thing but for graduate education, changing it slightly. Instead of just keyword I had them try to build out like the main concepts of composition studies and to do that. I had a number of articles that they read about various important concepts.

And then about halfway through the course, I have them read *Naming What We Know* so that they can kind of just like get all of those concepts in like a single go, so that they understand that writing is a social activity and that writing is multimodal and...all of those things that are in *Naming What We Know*. So that's how the keyword got adapted. Basically the keywords get adapted to threshold concepts. So it's the same kind of purpose, though, the keywords are serving to have like the same vocabulary around writing that everybody can talk about. That's kind of what I'm hoping to do with the threshold concepts thing, too, is get my graduate students to have this same set of theories that they can rely on so that everybody is kind of talking about the same things we all understand writing is multimodal.

We all understand writing is social. So then there's the reflective element. That's built in throughout like every part of the class. It starts on the first day. And the first thing, one of the first things that we do is I have them answer 10 questions about their stances on important things in composition studies. From my point of view things like what is the purpose of first year composition and how should we study composition and how best do we...what best research methods do we use when studying composition, that kind of thing. I told the students right up front, this isn't a test. It's not something that I even expect you to have a full answer or any answer for. In fact, you can write, I don't know...one of the students this time just put the shrug emoji for some of the answers.

And so yeah, and that's perfectly okay because the purpose of those questions is not answers. The purpose of those questions is thinking, is getting you to reflect about what it is that you want to know. What knowledge do you already have? How can you build on that knowledge? What knowledge don't you have? Where can you get that from? And how can you build these kind of bigger theories of composition? And we return to those questions regularly throughout the class. We step back and try to reflect on those things and kind of craft theories of teaching, writing, generally theories of teaching first-year composition theories of thinking about outcomes, theories of research, as the class moves along. The final project is a theory of composition studies. So instead of what Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak do in "Making a Theory of Writing" or a "Theory of Composition," instead I'm having them make a theory of the field, what they think that composition study means and how it applies to their specific teaching, to their specific research.

And they give me something that at the end...I always tell them is not really an end for the course. It's kind of a starting for their career. That instead of trying to set up something that like summarizes what they've learned this semester, what I'm trying to do is kind of get them to set up the scaffolding for how they can continue to build their ideas as they move on out and become a teacher and a scholar and an administrator moving forward, trying to think about these ideas and what they mean to them and what they mean to their specific content.

SW: Your teaching and research interests also focus on digital literacy and multimodality. How do you invite students to explore multimodality in first-year writing? What does it look like?

RS: Yeah, that's a really good question because I think that's a really central question and I don't think that we as a field have really grappled with enough. I know that's weird to say because it seems like that's in everything now, but I think that we still have this kind of idea that multimodal writing and traditional writing are two things. I just don't think that's true anymore. I think that all writing is multimodal. I think that not acknowledging that is kind of problematic. So that's the stance that I take in first-year writing is that the assumption is that everything that you do for the course is going to be in some ways multimodal. From the very first class I have them start incorporating things like screenshots and images and links and audio and video into anything that they're writing for the class if it's appropriate, if it helps you make the point that you're making, that you should include that.

And in the very first major assignment that they have, one of the things in my first assignment that I have for first year writing, what I have them do is explore a familiar discourse, something, some group that they are already embedded in in some way something like a part-time job or a religious organization or a sports community, or any kind of club or whatever that they're already a member of. They already understand the discourse really well. I have them break it down and kind of explain that discourse in meaningful ways for somebody that might be new that wants to join that discourse community. The purpose being to understand partially that writing is really contextual, but also to understand that writing is multimodal because every...I don't think that we've come across a single one of those discourse communities where that didn't include genres that were beyond just regular traditional text.

All of them will be using images or sound or whatever else to make meaning in those contexts. They have to explain those things, too. For example, I had somebody that worked at a pizza place and she was explaining the discourse of that community. She explained a couple of things like the fact that when a certain order was made, a bell was rung in the restaurant and then people had to go and make that order real quick for it. They knew that the bell meant go do that thing, or the fact that on tickets, they didn't write exactly what people had ordered. They would say pizza, and then draw these three little symbols beside it, which meant pizza with these toppings on it. It was just like a quick shorthand for it. And she had to record the bell ringing and she had to take pictures of the tickets that had the symbols on them and then break them down for us.

That's the way that it's incorporated and it continues on throughout the class so my second assignment is then exploring an unfamiliar discourse so they can apply what they learned from their familiar discourse to something new. Those unfamiliar discourses also usually always have some kind of non-linguistic text as part of it, too. So people a lot of times do online communities for the unfamiliar discourse. Then the final assignment is finding a problem in the local community and trying to solve it. And they actually have to send it directly to an audience that has the power to solve it. And that usually means also some kind of multimodal thing.

So for example, somebody wanted to change the location of where the ATMs are on campus. They needed to go around and take pictures of where the ATMs were on campus, to be able to say, "Here's where they are, there's a space over here that's much better trafficked and would be easier for us to reach. Can we move it over here? There's nothing there now, could it fit?" They had to take pictures of both areas to be able to demonstrate...I think it was facilities manager that they had to talk to for that, and demonstrate that...

Or our campus has relatively few of the blue emergency polls on campus relative to other campuses near us. So they went around and took pictures of all of the places where the emergency polls were and took pictures of all of these areas that were dark and far away from the emergency polls to try to demonstrate to the safety officer on campus. There is an actual exigency to put more of these out there because we have this long stretch of dark area where we've had a lot of violent incidents and...so those are all ways that multimodality is integrated.

One point that I'm trying to make with this big, long-winded thing is that I don't see multimodality as being a separate thing that I'm teaching. It's just part of the literacies of the entire class. It is the writing, I'm teaching digital writing, it is just writing at this point. It's not a separate thing.

SW: So you mentioned this assignment where students can examine online communities and discourse. I know you draw on Reddit. I'm thinking about your article in Kairos called "What Reddit Can Teach Us About Discourse Communities." In this article, you write, "Reddit can also remind composition teachers of the embedded and living nature of discourse." Can you talk more about what Reddit can teach us about discourse communities and the ways teachers can use this platform to talk about writing with students?

RS: Yeah, that's really important to me. I mean, that's one of the reasons that I include that assignment. Although I use Reddit, I think that you could probably deal with almost any social media platform. The main purpose of it is to demonstrate writing in context. What the students do in my Reddit assignment is they find a discourse community that they want to join, a sub-Reddit within Reddit. One of the smaller communities that's focused on a specific topic within there, and then they have to figure it out. So they have to read posts and they have to read comments and they have to figure out what's valued within that community. What do people want in good discourse within that community? And then they have to do it. And so they actually have to go in there and make comments and make posts.

They quickly learn if they got it right, if they figured out the genres of the community, because it is a living discourse, people are actually posting in that space every day. And if people get it wrong, they're just going to get downvoted or they're going to get weird comments. Then it becomes kind of a social scientific exercise of figuring out how to do it right. So they have to go back in there and repost and see if they can get something that gets positive reactions in some way, somebody responds to them or they get upvoted or whatever else within the community. I think that it's really useful. A lot of times the assignments that we have for class, have you read Elizabeth Wardle's piece, "Mutt Genres"? "Mutt Genres" presents this idea that a lot of times what we're doing in writing classes is presenting these genres that aren't real genres. They're not things that are used in the actual context.

So what I'm trying to do is even though it's relatively small scale, is get them to recognize real genres within real spaces so that they can turn around and do that in other spaces, too. So they recognize that the genres of their major are also a living discourse or the genres of their part-time job are living discourse or the genres of their future career are living discourse, and be able to see that and break that down. I do want to say that I do this explicitly. It's not just that I hope that they catch it. It's that we actually talk about the ways that what we're doing on Reddit connect to entering these other discourse communities, and trying to figure out the ways that discourse communities engage with language and with genres in different ways, and figuring out that, you know, in biology, we value this kind of discourse.

So that's the kind of discourse that I'm trying to replicate, or even, I mean, you don't necessarily have to replicate it exactly, the discourse that I'm trying to modify, but somehow fit within and just trying to understand those ideas. So that's basically what I'm trying to do there is trying to get them to get embedded on a small, relatively safe scale in Reddit and break it down so that they can figure out how to join it, how to become an actual member, and be able to explain that process. And it's extremely rare at this point, I've been teaching this for a long time. It's extremely rare at this point that someone's not able to do it.

People usually can eventually figure it out, although there's often really great hiccups along the way, so like people, every semester somebody gets banned, for example. So they join their community and they post something that's well outside the rules. I always say that this is a great learning experience. You have figured out exactly what they don't like. And now you can use that information to maybe figure out what would work better next time. So getting bans happens regularly, but it ends up being a useful experience for them. Yeah, I really love that assignment. I've been doing it now for almost 10 years. I think some version of this assignment for almost 10 years, although it's changed a lot during that time. That's the main reason why I was trying to get them to figure out that living discourse, that they can kind of connect that to the future context.

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