

Episode 137: Sara Beam

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Sara Beam talks about writing program administration, assessment and reflection, anti-ableism, grading contracts, and student engagement.

Dr. Sara Beam is an applied associate professor and university writing program director at the University of Tulsa. They love teaching first year writing, technical writing, composition pedagogy, and English as a global language. Storytelling is their favorite way of sharing information, making arguments, and connecting with people. Disability justice, abolition, and writing program administration are key components of their praxis, and their current projects include a collaborative accessible writing program assessment project and a collaborative archival project, recovering the stories of the students who attended the Presbyterian School for Indian Girls, Tulsa's predecessor institution.

Sara, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: As a writing program administrator, what's your administrative philosophy? What are some of the ways you think about writing program administration and your role as a director of the first-year writing program?

SB: The first thing that I say to people is that I value radical transparency. That unfolds in a lot of different ways in a writing program administrator position. I want to talk a little bit about just what a writing program administrator position means to me and then maybe I can explain how that applies to me. A writing program administrator is a scholar-teacher-coordinator-organizer. That's how it works in my mind; it's one of those big combined German words. I also tend to think of myself as a university professor. I don't belong to just a specific college, but to the university as a whole, and so that informs my entire perspective.

Those are maybe the three things that I share with the people that I work with and talk about with them in our orientation meetings, in our writing program meetings we have monthly just so that they know what I'm going for and can explain to me what that means for them or what that might look like for them. We can have this feedback loop going just naturally alongside that ongoing group conversation, alongside one-on-one relationship building and one-on-one work, whether it's directly supporting somebody's course development, assignment refining, supporting their assessment of student learning. They're figuring out how their scholarly pursuits and their teaching philosophy overlap. This is how things kind of unfurl for me.

That phrase, practice value of radical transparency means that I want to and need to share details from the conversations I have to take part in at the dean's level, the provost level, the college level. I want to share details from those unless somebody tells me explicitly, "Don't share these details." Then to me, what I keep in my notes and what I use to inform my decision making is basically open source. This is what we're working with, and this is what is motivating this

office's perspective and that office's perspective. With my teachers and my writing center consultants and my wonderful writing center director who's also an associate writing program director, Dr. Mark Rideout, we're sort of constantly working to figure out what does shared governance look like with writing program instructors, writing center folks? It's to tell the story of what's going on and solicit input, but also be very careful not to further burden those folks. If there is something that's in danger of crashing down upon them and interrupting the great work that they're doing, I want to offer them chances to provide input to do research, perhaps some committee work, but never, never oblige people to that.

SW: What pedagogies do you draw from in your first-year writing class and what kinds of classroom strategies do you use at the University of Tulsa?

SB: Oh yes, I love this question because my impulse is to talk then about how all of that philosophical perspective and those kinds of balancing and negotiation. I align my teaching with that, and I align that with my teaching. I'm going for a kind of whole person approach, trying to come from a place of compassion and joy if we can get there or if we can find it and harness that. Concrete ways this shows up in my class is number one, the importance of one-on-one conferencing. In my teaching, in our writing program, we've had this long-standing requirement that you do at least two conferences with students, which is possible because we have low course caps of 15, 17, and 18 in our sort of three core classes. I do at least two. I like to do more so that we transition from sort of class to one-on-one, and I like to definitely schedule one of those conferences to happen in the first three weeks so that we connect early on. That's a specific detail to that practice.

There's a balance, I think, a sort of a Socratic approach asking questions: what are you thinking about? How is your day going? How is this assignment going? Are your other classes causing extra challenges as you work on this assignment? Then also having a printed copy or an available copy of what we're working on, so I can literally just highlight and give to the person. This is where we can do more work together, or where you've said you're struggling or perhaps you thought this was going fine, but I see some issues where you thought there were problems is actually great. Just being able to clarify those little moments and bond with the students is important to me on whatever level they're comfortable with.

More recently, this has shown up since I was a TA, I've been experimenting with collaborative assessment or student assessment of their own learning. Lately, I've reworked my classes around labor/engagement contract grading, and I'm in the fourth or fifth iteration of that. Some practices from that really kind of illustrate what radical transparency and hopefully non-burdensome collaboration look like, how they work. The first thing that we'll do is I'll share a copy in Google Docs of the syllabus and the class contract and ask every student to make two comments, add a question, a concern, just some feedback, a compliment. This started with my online classes when we were doing emergency online learning, but I've maintained it for everybody's sake, including my own moving forward. Anyway, putting these class documents up and telling them, "What about this makes sense to you? I want to know, and I want to know what doesn't make sense, what's confusing. I will make typos also, and I will sometimes flip numbers and things like that. I also need your help just as readers to make sure that I'm communicating well." Opening up and

inviting them for feedback on the structure of the class, the pacing of the assignment, the grading style, everything about it is open for them.

In a perfect world, I would have time with the students at the beginning of the class for them to set everything up, but since we don't have that kind of time, I give them something to start with and invite their feedback. We also do that with the class contract and then we do that with every class assignment, every major project. They're providing input with me. Another feature of that style of grading, one last thing I'll mention is the sort of table where they're marking their labor and their engagement tasks. They're tracking those for themselves. I have a big preface saying, this is not a time card. This is not a clock in, clock out situation. This is a chance for you to think about the working conditions of your intellectual labor and to think about the contours and explore the contours of intellectual labor. What do they look like, what do they feel like? Beneath that are a couple spots for their reflection journals. I set an individual up with that for each student and they have this background pipeline directly to me to tell me about what their work is like. And it's amazing to see what they share.

SW: Sara, what writing program practices are you curating and developing that help you center that commitment to accessibility and anti-ableism?

SB: I have some parallel strategies that I use as a writing program administrator to try to bring in not only a kind of critical disability studies, but a disability justice kind of praxis to administration. As I mentioned earlier in my four word description of this administration work, at the end we're sort of coordinator and organizer. That's how I am trying to be as an administrator, especially with faculty in development with TAs who are brand new, or who have some experience but are expanding that. One direct parallel would be our instructor's guide, which is this huge 120-page booklet that we've had for ages that I've been working on. It's a living document. I do the same thing where I'll put it in Google Docs and we use it to ground our conversations. It's got sections of course with university policy and descriptions of particular classes, but then it's also got sections on pedagogical development. We can use that as our instructions: if you haven't done this before or if you haven't thought about it in detail, analytically perhaps, that you've always had this knack for teaching, but you don't have the words for it. It's important to me to teach folks and engage in conversation with folks about pedagogy and bring them language and perspectives that they would've gotten if they took an intro to education class and if they took at least a brief course on assessment. We've got that shared document that everybody is commenting on that changes with the times each year. My goal is not for us to unthinkingly adhere to what it says, but to always engage with it critically. It is there to serve us, not the other way around.

I also do two annual one-on-one conferences with everybody in the writing program, everybody who's adjunct, TA, postdoc. For adjuncts and postdocs, it depends on where they are and what they need. If we can't do our one-on-ones at the same time that I'm doing them with the TAs, we just do them when we need to. We have these monthly meetings, and we have an August orientation. All of those I set up to be Hyflex so that folks can join us and contribute how and when they are able. For example, maybe one last thing I'll mention, it's a good sort of story to illustrate how we create policy together. This is what I presented about at CCCC, I think it was 2021, I'm not sure. Anna Barritt, Tara Wood, and I had a panel together about academic ableism

and my focus was on revising our long-standing draconian punitive attendance policy. We had conversations as a group as we could over the course of the pandemic year when we had to shift to an emergency set of policies because the old one was clearly just out of line and unethical. One of those where, if you miss more than three classes, your grade is automatically dropped unless those absences are excused. Then there's this long process for getting them excused that involves required documentation and interaction with university authority figures and things like that.

There's just so many barriers especially thinking about here in Oklahoma and limited access to healthcare, limited access to transportation, all of those factors. Then the history of Tulsa, thinking about the McGirt case and the Muskogee reservation here thinking about Greenwood and Black Wall Street and the race massacre of 1921, bringing all those historical contexts to bear on our policymaking has been generative and led us to as a group decide to keep that emergency attendance policy, which is a lot more human. Yes, you need to be here, but we've got all these options for you to engage with the class. If you can be here in the moment, great, whether it's online or synchronously. If you need to catch up later asynchronously, we'll have a method ready for that, as much as the instructor can do without infringing on their own kind energy resources. That's important, always bringing it back to there. Anyway, we as a group decided to revise this policy together. We changed the book, we changed the syllabus templates, and now we're rolling with it.

SW: I'm curious as to how attendance policies work within a labor-based grading contract that often values more labor, more participation, more time, and so on. How do you negotiate or reconcile between a disability studies approach, attendance policies, and labor-based grading?

SB: There's this place of tension: your access needs and my access needs, to me, is not a place to feel fear about, but I think it can be a really generative. The way I set up contracts, I carry over the same kind of revised attendance policy there. There are no kind of points lost or gained for attendance. It's that engagement that I'm looking for and that engagement can look like varying amounts of time to me. The issue of time and looking for a certain number of hours isn't exact. It isn't standard for every student. When I put down doing your draft could take four hours, I put the little symbol for about, right? I always try to phrase it as, this looks different for different people. Some folks work a little bit every day, some people do big chunks on Tuesday and Friday. Some folks have to do everything on one weekend day and if they lose that day for some reason, they're shot, they're going to need an out because they're not going to have another chance. We work with numbers, but we think about them critically. That's what I tell students.

I also fill out a little labor and engagement log alongside them to illustrate what this looks like for me. And we have conversations about, well, during the week do you do the work for this class? Are you somebody who needs a rigid schedule or who needs the freedom and needs to be able to go back and loosely estimate, "Here's what I did; that's how it works for me." Sort of storytelling: where this work is happening, how it's happening, what conditions it's dependent on, and emphasizing that when we say work, it's not meant to be grinding. You don't have to grind for this class if you need to just focus on the reading. If you need to stare off into space for a certain amount of time, if you need to rest your brain and make a little bit of room for the muse to come in, all those things count. All those things are important. I explain things to the TAs and

grad students in this way and I invite them to use this model, they are not forced to. There are a few who do and there are others who use other models either based around other collaborative assessment models, based around student self-assessment to one degree or another. Then there are folks who just use the kind of traditional grading criteria. Our focus on the attendance policy was a great way just to get folks thinking about how complicated this part of teaching is, and how it's not a given, and it's meant to be queried. I really don't mind where you land in your own policies as long as you're thinking about learning conditions and teaching conditions and having some conversations with students about that part of a writing class.

SW: What kinds of conversations do you have with graduate students about assessing student engagement, particularly those who are new to teaching? This makes me think of pedagogical development and I'm interested in hearing how you help new instructors understand and quantify engagement.

SB: One kind of easy replacement that's more reform than an abolish approach to grading engagement is you can just supplement participation in drafting exercises, brainstorm exercises, anything where the student can share a kind of artifact. Whether it's written or doodled or a voice recording or a video of log, that is the approach that we'll take. If a student starts missing many of those, what happens is we'll generally set a threshold if you have missed out on three days in a row of these kind of activities. We're going to put a pause on everything for you, reach out, and we'll need to talk a little bit about what's going on because clearly, you're going to need to adjust your plans for the class to be able to keep up. And you need to decide, is this in the class? Are you going for an A for a B? Are you going for a C? If you need to skip out on this assignment, you can. Just recording points and just checking attendance turns into more looking for flags that we need to adjust something. With the labor diary and journal those are the chances and that's the pipeline for the student to talk to us a little bit about what's going on and what's possible.

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