

## **Episode 83: Sarah Z. Johnson**

Pedagogue podcast

*Transcript*

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

In this episode, I talk with Sarah Z. Johnson about Madison College, a two-year college in Wisconsin, classroom practices and strategies, writing center studies, and dual enrollment.

Sarah Z. Johnson is the Writing Center Director and a member of the English faculty at Madison College in Madison, WI. She currently serves as Chair of the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) and has done policy and committee work for NCTE and CCCC for many years. Sarah's research interests include dual enrollment, teacher preparation, tutor education, and all things related to Writing Program Administration.

Sarah, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: I was hoping we could start by talking more about Madison College, a two-year college in Madison, Wisconsin.*

*SZJ: I guess I want to start by talking about Madison College, which is also actually called Madison Area Technical College and it's one of those goofy things where for the longest time we were MATC with the "tech" and actually I think I'm going to get into that just a little bit, because it does have ramifications for the pedagogies and the practices that you're talking about. But one of the most important things about Madison College is that it's a dual mission school and by that I just mean that we prepare students for transfer – we are by far the largest transfer or feeder school to the UW University of Wisconsin, Madison, hundreds of other four year colleges as well, but that's our primary one – but we also offer I think 180 or more professional, two-year degree programs.*

*That's everything from diesel mechanic to architecture to graphic design, health-ed, all of that kind of stuff. I do promise to talk about pedagogy, but I guess I want to talk about structure first because I think that often has an impact on curriculum and I think especially department organization, my work through TYCA – the Two-Year College English Association – of which right now I'm chair, has really helped me understand that I think two-year colleges, even more than most other kinds of higher educational institutions are really impacted by state law. That's true I think of public universities, but it's very true of two-year schools. Maybe all of them except Tribal Colleges are even more impacted. But Wisconsin, where I am is actually kind of a prime example because some of your listeners may have heard that in 2018 the two-year college system in Wisconsin was dismantled, was dissolved and it was a catastrophe.*

*Actually, Holly Hassel, Joanne Giordano, I think have been guests on your show in the past, were both professors in this two-year college system and it was dismantled. I can get into the politics of it, but that's not really what this question is about, but it was rather catastrophic. So here's the thing though, because my college was in the "tech" college system that dismantling didn't touch us. Our funding remained strong. Even though in a lot of ways, there were a lot of*

folks throughout Wisconsin who were under pressure in terms of curriculum design and things like that. We never had to worry about that in the tech college system.

We weathered the Walker Administration and it was rather hostile to higher education, I think in general and humanities in particular, but we weathered it well because we could be sold to taxpayers as practical job preparation. Now, there could be all reasons why you're like not exactly, but we can say Madison College is sending out nurses, welders, IT, security folks, web developers, all that kind of stuff. So as I said, I promise back to your question about approach and pedagogy. So we have at our dual mission school, these two tracks, one is what we call our transfer track, our liberal arts transfer track and the other is our program, our professional communication track. But I think it's important to know that in almost all dual mission schools, it's never as simple as the welders get this English class and the university bound get this English class, our professional writing and communication sequence still places a really heavy emphasis on rhetorical understanding, media literacy, self-assessment, peer learning, all of those kinds of things.

I want to say, too, that our faculty are often teaching in these two tracks side by side. My typical schedule is not at all unusual in the sense that I teach a professional track, professional communication class called Oral Interpersonal Communication, right alongside Advanced Composition. I teach my peer tutoring writing center pedagogy class. I'm doing all of those things at once and many of my colleagues are doing something very similar. And I want to give a shout out to my faculty colleagues too, since you ask about Madison College. I do think it's important to recognize that there are such amazing faculty who teach at two-year colleges across the country. Just some of my colleagues in my department, we have nationally recognized poets and novelists. We have prominent African studies scholar, online learning specialists who kind of travel around the country. So it's something that I'm really thinking about Madison in general, something I appreciate about Madison, Wisconsin.

Actually, I started my career at a two-year college in rural North Carolina and I loved it, but it was a lot harder to find comprehensive PhDs in rural North Carolina than it is in Madison, Wisconsin. But I think it's important to recognize, like I said, that because we're all teaching all of these classes, the pragmatism of our program classes really infuses itself into our transfer, our LAT, our liberal arts transfer classes. I think the theory and the pure academic curiosity that is really fostered in liberal arts transfer sequence influences our professional program course design.

I guess the other thing that is important to know about teaching at this particular two-year college, but I think just in two-year colleges in general, and I've spent most of my career at two-year colleges, I love the work so much. I think a lot of it is the aspirational nature of it. Our students are trying and doing something that for most of them is brand new is really scary. It wasn't the expected thing. So yeah, some of them are coming just because their parents are some, most are coming in spite of, not in spite of their parents, but I mean, in spite of their experiences, in spite of the obstacles in spite. And so in that sense, it is so exciting to be able to be part of that.

*SW: So you framed the context of Madison College, and I was wondering what this means for your teaching specifically in the first-year writing classroom. Do you mind sharing some classroom practices and strategies or pedagogies you use?*

SZJ: So the thing about that's different than first year comp at a two-year college versus say a large research university or something like that, is that the folks who are teaching first year comp are very often experienced at it, have been doing it a long time. We come from a variety of approaches and so the idea that you would necessarily say, and I can say this because right now I'm one of the English department chairs. If I went into my colleagues and said, here's your syllabus, here's the book you need to use, here are the assignments, it would not fly. It would not fly, and that's not to say that there is no interest in coherence. Obviously that's one of the things that as a chair, we're constantly trying to do is help our colleagues, craft syllabi that provide...we've got outcomes, obviously, we say, here's what our students need to do this and this and this and this, how they get there is very much up to the faculty.

We try as much as possible to provide a lot of support. So, I talked about here's your syllabus, here are your assignments, here's your book. Do we force that? No. Do we offer it? Yes. And so what I will tell you practically what it looks like, and I'll just use our Comp I, which we call English One as an example, we have a number of different approaches. We have a kind of a standard what you would call kind of rhetorical argument approach. We have a writing about writing approach. That's the one I'm teaching right now that a number of us are doing. We have one that is more geared toward just practical, real-life genres and having people practice, having people read. One of the things that we always do is incorporate a multimodal piece of some sort, the idea of reading visual rhetoric, those kinds of things.

I guess to answer your question we definitely have outcomes. We have a list in our department, what we call non-negotiable skills that our students have to have, which is different than the larger outcomes, these skills are just kind of like if I get a student in my Comp II class that has never been introduced to the library's databases for example, then that's a problem, right? So we have this list of sort of skills, but there is quite a bit of freedom because of the experience of the faculty who are teaching those classes.

*SW: You also direct the writing center at Madison College. As a writing center director at a two-year college, what's your administrative philosophy or what guides your approach to writing center studies? Maybe you could talk just a bit about what the writing center looks like in your context.*

SZJ: Yeah, absolutely. I should say in many ways, I identify first as a writing center person, ever since I was in graduate school. I fell into writing center work and anybody who's done that kind of knows how that happens and ever since then I've been a writing center person, so even as I sort of gravitate toward other areas. So you're absolutely right. In so many ways, the writing center at Madison College, and I think at a number of different large two-year schools offer unique, or I guess, unusual affordances for various reasons. So one of the things that I think makes the writing center at Madison college particularly wonderful is that we have a mixed staff and a lot of two-year colleges do not use peer tutors, they're quite different.

And this isn't true across the board, obviously. But they are often quite different than the writing centers you find at four-year schools and universities. And a lot of it is just about time because by the time a student is qualified enough to be a peer tutor they're often about to transfer. And again, there are lots of great examples of phenomenal places. I mean, I'm thinking about Clint Gardner at Salt Lake, where there are really good writing centers staffed almost exclusively by peer tutors, but it is much less common into your schools for practical reasons. So the writing center, when I inherited it many, many years ago, we only had actually faculty tutors. They were part-time faculty who worked in the writing center. And that's actually fairly common at two-year schools who are lucky enough to have a writing center.

And because of the research I had done in the field, I basically went to my administration and said, "Hey, two-year college students can do this work if they're trained well, if they are given the tools, they can do this work." Then the big thing that I really argued for is that, gosh, a lot of our students are transferring to UW Madison. They can keep working for us even after they transfer, and a lot do. So that was one of the things that sort of allowed me to start a peer tutoring program. So we have this next staff where I've got professional tutors folks with degrees who are in the community. They've had experience in education, maybe they're retired teachers, maybe they worked for newspapers, whatever. And so they get specialized training.

We have faculty tutors and so that is part of, again, this is something that I've built into the structure of our center, where full-time faculty have the option to spend some of their workload in the writing center. I've made those arguments to my admin, to my deans by talking about the professional development that is afforded by that. So part-time faculty who work in the writing center get to see the composition sequence, because of course they're getting students who are getting assignments from all across our sequence. So they can see what other teachers are assigning, what they're doing. It's a beautiful big norming session in some way, right? But it also, I think in many of my colleagues have said this because even those who didn't ever have writing center experience before I always make, them do a little bit of training.

And of course we do peer observations and I force them into some writing center theory and history and pedagogy and they all talk about how it then impacts their classroom practice because I think, again, anybody who's worked in writing centers knows that's what happens when you work one on one with learners and you see how that goes. Because in a classroom, the arc of a semester is where you measure learning, whereas in a writing center session, it's that arc of an hour and so it's a little different. So back to your question about how does the context impact how I approach it as an administrator? I would say the big thing is unity of vision rather than uniformity of practice.

While there are certain things that I'm like "Yeah, you're going to want to do read aloud protocols. Yeah, you're going to want to, no matter if you are a faculty tutor who has 25 years experience or you're the brand new peer tutor who's just starting." These are the things that, that are generally acceptable. On the other hand, because I have such an incredibly diverse staff when it comes to background and knowledge and whatever, their practice isn't going to look exactly the same. The thing I have to say and if there are any writing center directors out there who are listening, try to get some mixed staff, because one of the beautiful things about it is that I can do

professional development for the whole staff and be talking to my peer tutors who are just learning and need some background and need reminders.

But really I'm talking to my colleagues who I think sometimes get a little too teachery when they're working one on one with students. So it's just a great way for the professional tutors and my faculty colleagues to mentor the peer tutors. And it's a phenomenal way for the peer tutors to then model and disseminate their knowledge often because they take an entire class with me, they have a better theoretical and historical framework and some of my English teacher colleagues. So it's great, it's really cool.

*SW: Sarah, you mentioned dual enrollment at the beginning of our conversation, and I know that's a big part of your research interest. In January 2021, you wrote a blog post about dual enrollment for NCTE. And you talk about how dual enrollment "has become one of the fastest growing educational trends in the United States" and how dual enrollment "holds enormous promise for students." Do you mind talking more about your research on the value of dual enrollment and the advantages or promise or the opportunities these programs offer students?*

SZJ: Yeah, absolutely. This is definitely, especially in the last five or six years been my major area of research and it's exciting. When done well, dual enrollment can really be a bridge between these two different worlds. I think it's especially important for us in higher education to recognize that they really are different worlds, especially for as first-generation students. We think about those high school students who are juniors and seniors, and I have a junior right now, and as the son of two college educated parents, he's already mentally getting ready for college, right? We're talking about what the expectations are, we're visiting...we're doing all of these things and so the transition it's hard for everybody, but it's not as hard for those students who have been mentally prepared almost since they were little kids to make this next step. For a lot of first generation students, it really is a huge gap, right? And these are the students who are most likely to attend community college. So this is a population that I feel is really important to reach out to.

Research shows over and over again, that the students that we were just talking about, who've been prepared to go to college, they take AP classes. Statistically, that's what they do, they take AP. It's the students who probably weren't planning on going to college or who aren't sure, or who aren't in the AP classes is to take dual enrollment. That's why it has such promise because students who take dual enrollment tend to be from lower socioeconomic classes, more minority students, way more first-generation students. So it's a powerful tool. It's in many ways, a soft opening, if you want to think about it that way, it's kind of like a scaffolded introduction to the expectations I think, and the intellectual risk taking that is expected hopefully in a college classroom.

And that often isn't through no fault of high school teachers. I mean, high school curriculum, I think almost by default by necessity has to be sort of closed, right? It's not about intellectual risk taking because it can't be. I think for some students that shift is really difficult to make. So dual enrollment programs can do that. But honestly, I think to tell you the truth in some way, I think the promise of dual enrollment programs is almost more important because of the collaboration it fosters between high school faculty and post-secondary faculty, because we are, I think we do, if

we're not careful, we operate in such different worlds that when we are not talking to each other. That handoff, right? I mean, you think about it like a relay race, like we're constantly dropping that poor baton and the baton is the students.

So well designed dual enrollment programs really allow faculty to talk to each other and to learn from each other because I got to tell you, I would not know how to teach a class full of high school seniors, about to...they are checking out. Yet my colleagues who are teaching dual enrollment in high school, they do it. They somehow find a way to get those students engaged across the finish line in a way that with more patience than I could because again, as a college faculty, we are much more in the mindset of I can help you, I can support you, I can give you everything but I can't get you across the finish line and I think high school teachers are better equipped to figure out how to do that.

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