

Episode 152: Shaina A. Nez

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

Pedagogue launched in 2019 with the goal of amplifying perspectives and experiences on teaching writing across institutions. For the most part, I feel like the podcast has promoted a wide range of perspectives across post-secondary education contexts. Starting out, my hope was for Pedagogue to be a platform that fills gaps in more traditional alphabetic scholarship, which often privileges teachers situated in more research-intensive universities that have space and time to publish. I wanted the podcast to be a space that embraces and showcases experiences and knowledges from all types of classrooms, for us to consider and think about what teaching writing looks like, what it means to teach writing in different contexts, from two-year colleges to Historically Black Colleges and Universities, to Hispanic-Serving Institutions, to private colleges, to small liberal arts colleges, to large and small public universities.

Through all these episodes, there's still something missing. The voices and perspectives of teachers at Tribal Colleges and Universities. I taught basic writing and first year composition at a Tribal College as an adjunct for almost two years, and those students and classrooms impacted my perception and understanding of teaching more than any other context. There are currently 32 fully accredited Tribal Colleges and Universities in the United States, serving approximately 30,000 full-time and part-time students according to the US Department of Education. This is the third episode in a 10-week series that highlights tribal colleges and universities.

In this episode, Shaina A. Nez talks about teaching at Diné College, language and culture sovereignty, and what she wished people knew about Tribal Colleges and Universities.

SAN: Our tribal colleges have very, very limited capacities, very limited ways of networking with other mainstream colleges in that respect. I really don't like using that term, mainstream colleges, because I feel like that just makes tribal colleges sound inferior. I do want others to think about these spaces in terms of tribal colleges and universities as equal as opportunities for students.

Shaina A. Nez is Táchii'nii born for Áshjìhi. She serves Diné College as a senior lecturer in creative writing in English. She's a doctoral candidate in justice studies with the School of Social Transformation and Inquiry at Arizona State University. She earned her MFA degree in creative nonfiction from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Her work has appeared in *A Gathering of Native Voices*, *Nonwhite and Woman: 131 Micro Essays on Being in the World*, winner of the 2023 Silver IPPY Award in the category of Adult Multicultural Nonfiction and Elsewhere.

Shaina, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You teach at Diné College. Can you talk more about your institutional context?

SAN: Certainly. So Diné College primarily serves at least the Navajo Nation, and so that's about 27,000 square miles. Students either can range from within the Navajo nation, and because we've expanded into online classes out of state, students can come through. Primarily, we do have Diné learners, but that's not just who we serve. We serve other tribal nations as well as minoritized peoples coming in. So adult learners, first year college freshmen, and classes can range, so I just looked at our records from last semester and we've had about 12 courses in English 101: College Composition One and about 14 courses for English 102: College Composition 102. And currently we have about, I'd say, 11 instructors, including myself, that do teach either online or at the main campus or the other branches that we do have that's, again, within the Navajo Nation. So that's who we are working with and it's just again, a wide array of learners coming in.

SW: Shaina, can you talk more about how you approach teaching writing? What are some of your pedagogical values or maybe some ideas you want students to take from your writing classes?

SAN: So we do have this philosophy that's Diné rooted, [foreign language 00:05:05], and so that entails four concepts. One is [foreign language 00:05:12], which we say is to think, and [foreign language 00:05:16], which is to plan, [foreign language 00:05:20], but in that word it does mean life. But for this instance and for the college, we use it as implementation so that students are self-directed. So even that word or phrase that we use, [foreign language 00:05:37], means for students to have that confidence. [foreign language 00:05:43] is the last concept, and that's looking at the reflection stages. Again, even that requires students to be confident and aware, and we look at that as more of the writing and then revision stages.

So, we try to implement this philosophy within the courses that we do in terms of writing, and I think it's pretty valuable. I try to tell students within my courses that writing's a process and it's going to require a lot of practice, and given just the time that we do have, I'm not looking for perfect. I'm looking for engagement, and them establishing a way for them to learn to write. I guess in terms of their own needs, because again, I do think students have this idea that they all need to be on the same stage or the same premise to even learn what writing means to them. Some may not even grasp even just that, and that's fine. So, it's just really me giving them this introductory to what writing in terms of its purpose and what they can gain and what it's going to take for them throughout their career and their journey.

In addition to just the [foreign language 00:07:16], I do also mention to students about rhetorical sovereignty. In that sense, Scott Richard Lyons, who was an indigenous theorist and thinker, really wanted to look at how natives at the time wanted to, I guess, write effectively and look at how those needs are being met and what that also entails in terms of history and culture. So, I do think if we grasp topics that interest students, that's how they seem to be more engaged. I do think these concepts, [foreign language 00:07:58], and rhetorical sovereignty, it gives the students a sense of who they are and what they can bring in terms of written communication. So, I just look at those processes as it is and hoping that students just have a firmer understanding of what just writing entails. I think that's really all I would want them to start thinking about throughout the class.

SW: What texts and writing assignments do you use? How do students respond to these at Diné College?

SAN: So I think when I first entered teaching just as an adjunct, I wasn't too sure in terms of what texts I would be using. So I did need to, I guess think about the texts that I went through as an undergrad, and I just wanted to, again, experiment to see what they think in terms of the books, the resources. I am using *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, and I think right now it's in between. I think some students may understand it or some students think maybe it's just a bit too much more into, I guess, the Greek pathology. But I do think stories in that context, they do grasp. They like *Professors as Writers*. I mean, even just books in terms of self-help and guiding. I mean, I think I always need to experiment on myself as well for writing, so that book becomes pretty helpful.

Writing Public Policy, and I think even looking at how public policy is being written and sometimes there are sources and texts that we read just for exercises that they do come across or that they do see in their field. So, I think even just talking about policy in some light gives them more of a broader sense of where written communication can come from. *Elements of Indigenous Style* is something that I've been reading a lot and I try to introduce a bit more with students. So I do think, again, rhetorical sovereignty and just looking at the history, culture, because majority of the students that I do work with, I would say the best part of it is most of them speak fluent Navajo, [foreign language 00:10:47], and they're very fluent in their culture and their traditional practices. So, anytime I'm given a prompt that they can talk about some of those areas, I enjoy reading those just because they have so much knowledge, and they're teaching me in a way to where it's just there's reciprocal aspects between student and instructor. There's just this line of respect that I get within that writing.

The Norton Field Guides, and I've heard from a colleague in one previous time that she taught it and she wasn't expecting that book to be very bulky. So even just seeing that book, I mean, I still use it, but I think I use it more just as resources to help students in terms of other processes. Again, scaffolding, if students are having, I guess, difficulty trying to outline or mind map in a sense. So any of those visual styles helps coming from those Norton field guides. Then lastly, the one key book that I like using is *Community Writing*, which is researching social issues through composition. I really like that because right now I am also a PhD student in, thank you, Justice Studies. And even just with that social issues, talking to students, I think even beforehand when it comes to just small exercises that we do in classes, I really like having to hear their opinions.

I always think Indigenous or just Natives in general have very good opinions. You could give them a prompt or even ask what sort of improvements would they like to see in their community, and that gives them just the space to just take off and start writing about a lot of things that do need improvements in the community, and that's just them being members, practicing that. One thing I do also see as a very big takeaway is I guess deconstructing writing. So there are moments when we do look at pieces of writing and we talk about how this writer is either structurally or strategically looking at ways of introducing their writing, how they're also just transitioning into the other paragraphs. So, I guess coding alongside with the students to get them to understand what ways they can be a bit more strategic. I guess it helps with their outlining,

and to me, I think even just coding, going through that process step by step is something that they enjoy.

As far as the mission and the philosophy, I do try to take those steps. So there are concepts. So, the first concept thinking I do ask them those prompts, I ask them some questions like, "If there was something that you wanted to improve in your community, what would it be?" And so there would just be one topic that they would have to focus on. Just even writing even a half a page on that, it just gives me an idea of what to expect in their writing and what they could also be, I guess, improving on in the first, I guess, before midterms in a sense. And so I tell them, I always try to give them sort of prompts, questions, they can start to think about for themselves or even just as far as goals planning for themselves. So just those questions, reflection questions, can really go a long way from what I'm seeing.

Planning, so as far as [foreign language 00:15:12], even just giving them a checklist and us for us to go through that each week, that helps them get a bit more organized and structured. In some capacities, it works in other ways, it may not. So, I really not try to put pressure on them to think, "This is the only way to think about your writing." So most of the time, a lot of these activities that I do implement, they're more of experimentations, and it's just how I'm starting to see how students engage, I guess, the first couple of weeks in class. And so [foreign language 00:15:52], which is the implementation, that whole writing aspect is when I'll give the assignment, give them some guidelines of what to work on. So those stages, it again becomes that whole self-direction and seeing how they perform in just that capacity.

Lastly, again, when we look at [foreign language 00:16:18], which is this whole reflection and revision stage, we go back to those writings. There are moments where I do encourage peer reviews, but then again, it just depends because some students may not feel as confident to share their work with others, so it's like a buildup toward that. I guess maybe when that does happen, I just have them turn in those papers to me first so that I look at those, and I guess the more that we have conversations and it can just be on one issue of that day or one sort of topic. I think the more that they start to be engaging, that's when I know that they're a bit more comfortable to share work. There are moments when I kind of have to push them, and I do think that showed a lot in my first year of being a full-time faculty member. So, I did have to teach classes in Ship Rock. I did have English 101, which was an in-person class, and so that I felt was just a really big learning space for me and from the students, aside from coming back from teaching solely online classes. So, coming back to teach in person just really gave me more of a grasp of what I could do better.

SW: What are some challenges to teaching writing at Diné College?

SAN: I think now that I'm teaching online classes, and I guess it would just depend on the semester, I would say time constraints in some sense. I think there's a lot that I could still be covering with students, and some students have just really good questions as far as their assignments on what can they do better, and I think that's kind of the value that I see with the students. As far as them being very opinionated on concerns that matter to them, their education matters to them as well. So they're always writing emails, asking questions, even specific questions in terms of just those first drafts that they turn in, what else could I do better? Is there

anything or could we meet? I guess, they're not shy to meet with me, so they really do want to understand their improvements.

I think in that capacity, the time constraints, and I say that because summer sessions we teach about five weeks, and sometimes I get a little bit winded by trying to, I guess, figure out how could I teach 101 within this five weeks, especially for students that are just coming straight out of high school. I do see some of those challenges that they leave high school coming into freshmen or English 101. And just even with that, I see sometimes there, I guess lack of mechanics or lack of foundations of some writing concepts. When we do have conversations about descriptive, expository, going into all of those foundations, they're just still confused in that sense. So I start to think how was high school, their experience for them in writing? So, I guess it just makes me want to, again, put more exercises that could be beneficial for the class for them, just looking again at those foundational skills, even as far as engagement with the resources.

So as I mentioned, Ancient Rhetorics was a book that it had mixed reviews from students, even as far as the Norton Field Guides. I mean, that textbook was pretty bulky, and some of the students were intimidated by the fact that books were this bulky for one class. So, I just had to read the cues of my students, seeing if these writings were beneficial in any way. If they weren't, then I would always have to make sure it was grounded back to something more cultural, something that was more pressing for them to think about. So with students, I think when I mentioned lack of engagement, I think students still are trying to, I guess, decipher what is academic writing versus creative writing, for example. So there is a moment where I do assign just one expository essay, and for them, I think they get excited to write about that because the perimeters aren't too strict, I would say.

So they do have this way of coming into writing more in that creative space. But again, once we start to talk about research or argumentative essays, then they understand that, "Oh, there is a different mode of writing, and how am I going to approach that?" I think as far as trying to meet or how they think, we do talk about voice, tone and even just as far as sentence starters, because there's moments where transitions for them become quite difficult when we do outlining and when we look at those strategies in those steps, in some ways they do engage. Most of the time they engage. Then there's those questions that they have, "How am I able to transition from one paragraph to the next, and how am I able to..." Again, there may be two paragraphs that they may think is similar and they'll even have questions, is as far as combining, or, "Am I able to keep one sort of transition within this piece?" So there's detailed questions that I get really excited about, but again, it's really, I would say none of those questions start to peak until at least by the third or fourth week. So again, it's just working with them.

SW: What do you enjoy the most about teaching writing at your institutional context?

SAN: I think just engaging with the students. Like I said, sometimes these resources, the ones that I named off, may not really serve them, the students, well. And so there are moments where I just would have to just go through that whole experimental phase, but switching gears to talk about, again, where did they see writing? And they'll express just various ways they see it, and so looking at those ways of writing, I think that helps both of us communicate better, engage in

writing in that sense. I think there was one activity where I had the most engagement was talk about, and I'm not too sure if you're familiar, but once COVID was at its peak, our nation at the time had monies coming in from, I think it was the CARES. And so once that was established, there was hardship checks given to members of the Navajo Nation.

When we talked about those checks, students immediately were saying, "My relative or so-and-so had not even received that yet." And we were basically, I think we just wrapped up the second distribution, and so students talking about relatives not receiving that. I had moments to actually work on the board, show them visually what an outline could look like just from mapping, and also even talking about the injustices of those checks coming in, who gets served first and how did they feel it should have went about in terms of the distribution. So I mean, we covered a lot of bases just with looking at the community itself, again, the 27,000 square miles covered and how those checks are going to be distributed to all of the communities. So, we really looked at that externally and then internally, but just to even have that moment, and it was maybe the last half hour of class, students again wanted to engage in those questions and in those areas. So as they were talking, I was basically the visual, writing everything down, showing how these features of what they're speaking about, how it can be structured for them to think about in terms of a paper. So, I think that really gave them an extra attention to how writing can be looked at visually.

SW: Shaina, what do you wish people knew or understood about Tribal Colleges and Universities?

SAN: I think what the grand takeaway of that, or what I would hope is that our tribal colleges have very, very limited capacities, very limited ways of networking with other mainstream colleges in that respect. I really don't like using that term, "mainstream colleges," because I feel like that just makes tribal colleges sound inferior.

I do want others to think about these spaces in terms of tribal colleges and universities as equal, as opportunities for students in our communities to even have this sovereignty and education, our independent and our inherent right for nations within this country to have access to higher education. Again, I do think, because of history and how power has been displayed in that context has really, I guess put a lot of misconceptions and assumptions about us as tribal nations within the United States. There's just so much that still needs to be recognized and understood about our communities. And most of the time, I think that assumption is looked upon by the status quo of we get these free opportunities and free land and just these really negative assumptions towards our people.

It's disheartening because they don't really understand what sort of premise or what sort of historical context has built up. This is sort of a reflection of what had happened since colonization. So we're doing our best, and we'd really love the networking of trying to establish this bridge for students to just feel empowered, to feel that confidence that they can succeed at tribal colleges and move on to other colleges internationally or nationally.

So I just hope that others can understand we're not inferior institutions, that we do our best and we work twice as hard to just even get our students to where they're at. Students again, come

from very, very diverse backgrounds, income and status, in that sense. It varies. For us as educators, we just want the best for them. We want to give them the tools to succeed. Sometimes that sort of confidence may even lack with us as instructors, because if we're not getting that sort of sense of engagement, we just feel like we need to do better as well, and we have to push, we have to keep pushing. So I do think there's just this continuous cycle of us working together and that I think the only way we'll be stronger is just by having this networking, this bridge, and hopefully other allies to come and want to be a part of what we're doing here at tribal colleges. So we do, I mean, just one thing to add, for Diné College, we have a symposium that we've been trying to, I guess, build up more capacity for writers. And so even just trying to get other instructors to come to the symposium to speak about writing and composition, even the outreach towards mainstream colleges, we've had good numbers, but I do think we could be building off of it better. And just having, again, that sense of community would go a long way for us.

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