

Episode 14: Sharon Mitchler

Transcript

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

In this episode, I have the pleasure talking with Sharon Mitchler. Sharon is a professor of English and Humanities at Centralia College. She has been in the classroom over 30 years initially as a high school teacher. Later, she moved to community college classrooms where she has taught for the last twenty-four years. She currently teaches composition, literature, humanities surveys, film and ethics. Her current research focuses on Teaching for Transfer. She presents regularly at TYCA regional conferences, the Washington Community College Association conference, the National TYCA conference and 4Cs. Her publications have appeared in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, and she is a former national chair of the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA).

In a Pedagogue Bonus episode, "Who Says What (And What Gets Told) About Higher Education," I talked with Mike Rose about his experiences observing and spending time in a community college classroom. He shares how community colleges are where most of education takes place in the US, and he problematizes who writes and talks about these schools. After that episode, I received a very kind email from a teacher-scholar saying thank you, just saying thanks for inviting that discussion and projecting it because two-year colleges and teachers have historically been the leaders of education and public engagement.

As many of you know, I'm an advocate for facilitating conversations and providing space for all teachers to be heard, and using this podcast as a means for crossing institutional and positional lines that exist in education, in hopes of fostering community. If you would like additional information on two-year colleges, TYCA and the *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* journal are really great places to start.

With that said, I'm really delighted to talk with Sharon about her experiences, her research on writing transfer, and her thoughts on making cross institutional work more visible and more valued.

Sharon, thanks for joining us.

SW: I was hoping maybe we could start by talking about Centralia College and your institutional context, and what you're teaching.

SM: Centralia College is halfway between Seattle and Portland. It's a very small rural college, we have about 1,900 full time enrolled students that's divided between a variety of programs and locations. So, we have academic transfers, so those are students who are doing two years with us and then going to another institution, or they may be doing a smaller part and then transferring on. So, they may do a class with us, or they may do a year with us, or they may do a full two years and not complete a degree, or they may do three years and change their mind and then transfer, there's many different paths. Then we have technical programs and certificates and degrees, those range from one quarter certificates, all the way up to a year certificate or a two-

year degree. We also do continuing education classes for adults, pre-college classes, starting with learning the language, for second language students because again, as a rural entity, if we don't offer it, it doesn't exist, so we found ourselves doing all these things.

We also do GED and high school equivalent, and then we have a number of campuses. We also have two prison sites, so we have students who are at Cedar Creek Correctional Facility, and so they're within four years of being released. We have a limited number of faculty, we have five full-time faculty in what's called the English department. We don't have a separate WPA, because we're so small. We all teach composition and rhetoric, and some of us teach other things as well. I have a master's degree in humanities and a master's degree in English and a PhD in English, and so I do literature, and I do composition, and I do a whole series of humanities courses. Our comp classes are kept somewhere between 24 and 28 students, depending on how many sections you're teaching. The big load that we do most of is that last class right before college level, we call it 99, then we do English 101, which is expository writing and English 102, which is a research class.

We also have a variation of the research class that's a science-based research class that has a different number on it, and we do technical writing, we do creative writing. So the short version is, throw me into a room full of students, I need to know who they are and what their goals are, and then I adjust. If you want to teach in a place where every single section is going to be a little different, the community college is the place for you, because the mix of students, the demographics can be really fascinatingly different, even from section to section in the same term. We have a wide range in economic backgrounds, so we have folks who never dreamed they'd become to college ever, ever. It wasn't on their list, wasn't something that they have family connection to, we refer to them as first-generation, lots and lots of first generation students, and then we have lots of people whose life has taken a turn, they've lost a job, a relationship has changed, a whole variety of reasons and they all ended up in a class together.

So, facilitating those conversations in that space is eternally ... challenging doesn't get to it because it's exciting.

SW: How do you facilitate in class conversations? How do you bring that community together?

SM: Bringing a class together as a community is really central. English 101, and I'll use that for an example today, is the class that most of our students are going to take and it's the place where they're going to see people who are in other areas as well. So, I've got diesel students, I've got nursing students, I've got someone who's trying to finish high school, they're all together in the same room. So, building a community becomes really important. I also know that there are a lot of people who are anxious. They're not excited about this space, they're not sure who else is in the room with them, they may have tremendous amounts of confidence in some aspects of their academic life and not at all in others, and nobody wants to reveal that on the first day of class. We do a lot of safe writing, five minutes at every class, at the very beginning.

I have a stack of cards with questions on them and those questions are generated by students at the end of each class, I have them for the next section, and at the very beginning of class, one person draws a card, I write the question up on the board and we spend five minutes writing

either on that question or something else that they want to write about themselves. They can do whatever they want. It's quiet writing time and I never see it, and I never ask for it. I use that as a stepping stone for, here's a way that you can start thinking about what you might want to write about. That there's something that came out in those early cards, and they keep a journal, or they keep it someplace in their own notebook, they do it on a computer, but that's how you start writing. You start with the things that you've already got, and it starts to help leverage a sense of, writing isn't a thing you just sit down and do, that it's a more prolonged activity, and that you handle that in lots of different ways.

Another thing that I do an awful lot of is modeling. When we get ready to do something like peer response, we use one of my papers first. I often write right along with students so they can see my reaction to that, if I'm getting frustrated, if I'm getting lost, if I'm like, I do not know what to do with this paragraph, because I love it, but it doesn't fit, but I love it and I don't know what to do. They get to see all of that. So, when we do peer response, we'll start often with one of my papers and I'll put it up on the screen, and we'll talk our way through, well, what could you say to me about this, and what's helpful, and what's not helpful? It gives them a chance to practice the skills without having it be their work, because the sense of identity that's connected to what they're writing is often right below the surface for a lot of these students. And it's really scary to have your work in the hands of other people, it gives them a safe space to see how it works and to try things out and they learn really quickly that you can't hurt my feelings, and that I really do want to know what's not working, but what I can't see because it's mine.

So, we do an awful lot of that kind of work, and then when we shift into students doing that work, I'm roaming around the room as they're working in small groups or they're working in pairs, so that they can ask me questions and I can ask them questions as we go, but it drops the stakes quite a bit. And again, because these are students who have huge time commitments outside of the classroom, and the idea that they are going to go home and spend two hours agonizing over a draft is probably not a useful context when you're thinking about how you're going to develop class time. So, things that you can do in class that give them a chance to practice, that help to encourage them to see that it's a process that it takes longer, those are really helpful.

SW: I think it's important for us to consider how we are ethically assigning and assessing writing. That student demographic who is working 50 to 60 plus hours a week, who has a family, who doesn't have the same affordance or relationship with time. Do you mind sharing how you address and approach that student demographic and how your teaching changes?

SM: I use shorter reading assignments. If we use longer reading assignments, we come back to them multiple times. It's not, read 20 pages, come back and let's have a conversation. Often when we've read something, the first thing that happens in class the next day is everybody gets a highlighter and I ask them to put the phrase or the word or the section of what they read that meant something to them, that made sense to them, that seemed important to them, and we then develop our conversation based on that. We can come back to that same piece two or three times and delve into the finer points, but that highlights that their knowledge is important, it gets them actively involved in class. It helps them see that the class is focused on what they need to accomplish the goals of the class, and that's central. Again, with a lot of adult learners, it's

important to make that direct connection. They're spending money, they're spending time, there are other things that they're not doing because they're in that classroom, so you better make sure that the connections between what you're doing and the end goal and how that attaches to the world that they inhabit when they're not in your room are crystal clear, and you don't waste time, and you don't ask people to do things that you don't scaffold well for them to be able to do.

SW: You taught in high school for 13 years and at a community college for 24 years. I'm interested in how those two experiences and/or contexts intersect.

SM: One of the most helpful things for me as a college teacher was having taught high school first because it meant that I taught section, after section, after section all day long, it's generally five or six different classes that you're teaching with probably half of the people in the room who really don't want to be there. They have other things to do, they are not necessarily fully engaged. I've taught in public high schools, I've taught in private high schools, there is just a very different reason for people being in the room, which meant I had to learn how to read the room. I had to learn how to draw people in, I had to learn how to make things very clear. It's not just that, I'm asking you to do this because I'm your teacher or I'm your professor, but there's actually something important that we're doing. When I was teaching high school and had the benefit of having going through education courses that helped me with a more deliberate pedagogy than I've ever seen in terms of college preparation, that gave me that sense of connection, and drawing explicit lines between things, and making sure that I wasn't asking anybody to do something that didn't really help them get to their goals.

It also means that at this point, my classroom management is pretty darn good. I know what's going on in the room for the most part, faster than anybody else in the room because I'm used to managing 35 to 40 students in an English class, many of whom didn't do the reading, or didn't want to do the writing, or weren't necessarily interested, along with the people who did all of the reading and a whole bunch more, and who have written 50 pages when I asked them to write a paragraph. So, managing the differences between all of those students has really been helpful as I've moved into community college. And I think that's why when I started to teach in community college, it felt very much like a home that I wanted to establish professionally. There's big differences between a high school classroom and a community college classroom. One is definitely full of adults, one is definitely full of people who are not yet of legal age and that changes what you can talk about and how you can do a lot of things.

I love that community college students are fully adult and you can read all the things and write all the things and talk about all the things that are necessary and important and arrive organically in that conversation. It also means that I find the differences in community college students to be a variation of the theme of, everybody's different in a high school and I really love that. I can ask a question or put together an assignment, sometimes it goes completely in a different direction than I anticipated and rather than going, "Oh no, I didn't do this right. I didn't plan for all of it." Because I did so much work in high school initially, my response is, "Oh, as long as it's still getting us to our overall objectives, let's follow where the students are leading." And that has meant that even though I've been in the gig now for what, over 30 odd years, every day is exciting and every day is fun and every day has a plan, and every day has a plan B, and a plan C,

and I probably have a D, E and F that I don't know about that I could pull out if I need to, because sometimes things just go in a different way.

And I love that, it means that students, it's really a student-centered classroom. I'm there to facilitate, I'm there to help, I'm there to encourage, I'm there to put sideboards on things, to redirect, to praise as much as humanly possible. That's my job and I love that.

SW: I was hoping we could spend some time talking about your research on teaching for transfer. What are you learning, and how is that research helping shape your teaching and how you teach writing?

SM: I got involved with this research, it started about four years ago in its early stages, Kathy Yancey grabbed me at 4Cs. She knows me from other work and said, "Hey, I'm working on something with teaching for transfer, and I think you'd be great, will you do it?" And I said, yes because it was Kathy Yancey. Teaching for Transfer is something that she's done a lot of work with. And at Florida State University, she and Kara [Taczak] and Liane Robertson put together some work that showed that teaching for transfer was useful and it involved several components. One is scaffolded assignments, another is a set of key terms. They tested it and it worked, and then they did a second iteration where they tested it with a few more people, they invited a couple more institutions. And so, the version that I got involved in, there are eight different sites where we're checking to see if using teaching for transfer works in different locations and in different contexts.

I was asked to join because I teach at a rural community college. There's also an urban community college and a suburban community college who are also involved as well. So in the fall of 2017, we all taught parallel classes, keeping in mind that we would need to make adjustments for each of our contexts, that at the heart of the research is to make sure students learn what they need to learn. We did a series of interviews in common, we did a set of assignments for the most part in common, we did a series of exit email surveys back and forth, and then that following summer, we all got together and coded all of this work, and looked to see if the central question does this work, in more than one place, could be answered, and we just never really can. What we also discovered is that context is really important, that you have to make adjustments for the world that you are in.

So, the readings that might work at Florida State University need to have some adjustments for my students because of time and context. For example, my students are really, really sensitive to anything that makes them the subject of research, they don't like to be bugs under the microscope. They are adults, and they have lives that are full and complex, and they just get really upset when you talk to them like they're 18, even the 18-year-olds. Choosing from amongst the available writing, reading assignments, ended up being a really strategic set of choices. As we've continued to do more work, we've discovered that there are some things that we're learning about what makes students most ready to use teaching for transfer in their own context. Because not everybody does it perfectly. My big concern was, initially, this is a new thing and it's new to me, and I want to make sure that students always get the best out of their experience in the classroom.

And after having now used this with four different sections, I'm pretty delighted to say that students are able to walk away from this being able to use key terms and ideas about writing situations to start new writing situations successfully, and that's the point. That's the idea that's at the heart of this, is that students end up not learning how to write an essay, but students learn how to evaluate a writing situation, figure out what they need to say, figure out the best way to say it, and have tools and abilities to mobilize those sets of questions, and they do it.

SW: This is my last question. I'm thinking about the opportunities and potential relationships that can happen between community colleges and four-year universities or high schools and college. Those conversations aren't always happening, they don't always exist, and those relationships aren't always being encouraged or developed. I think we would all be better teachers if they were happening consistently, and I think we would be building better, more sustainable communities with those relationships. You've taught in different contexts, and your research brings together different teachers, what do you think we can do to generate those conversations and to work together across institutions?

SM: It can be quite problematic for a couple of reasons; one is time and money, because especially high school teachers today with all the state mandates, are really under very tight constraints about what they can do in their classrooms and how much they need to accomplish. And then, if they're in a state where there is a series of state exams, those really take the lion's share of preparation time that they need. In order to have those conversations really happen, there needs to be a space and that means there needs to be a funding source, and at this point, there isn't a consistent funding source unless there's somebody who wants something. I would say that the research project that I've been most recently involved in is an example of a space where it's worked really well. We're working across institutions in higher education, because we also were working with grant money from 4Cs and from some other places because Florida State University is a research institution and had access to graduate students who could be helping us with this work and help facilitating our conversations, that's what has made the difference.

And it's been an incredible chance to spend time with other scholars and other teachers, and the things that I take away from that entire experience is that I want to work with other people more. Writing in groups, writing with other people, talking with other teachers ends up being incredibly valuable, but you have to have those pieces. Otherwise, everybody's buried up to their neck in the things they need to do. And you might be able to get a meeting together, but you're not going to be able to replicate it.

I'm sure somebody has said this better or in more accurate ways and studied it, but I tend to think of it as academic privilege. That there are layers and levels of the kinds of inquiry that you can do based on the institutions that you're working within, and generally, people who have the most academic privilege don't see it because that's how privilege works, and those who don't have it are frustrated trying to explain what it is and how it works and we need to do a better at crossing those boundaries and those borders, finding ways again, to open a space where it's teachers getting together to talk with other teachers.

And as I've done this most recent work with Kathy Yancey and the group that she put together, I've been fascinated to watch how she facilitates these conversations, and makes it clear that all

members of this conversation have equal importance and need to be listened to, and if we need to wait for somebody to complete something because their schedule is crazy, then we wait. If we need to extend our conversation to a second meeting, then we extend to a second meeting. And again, some of that is made possible because there's some money behind this. One of the reasons this collaboration has worked so well is that we're all working on finding something out together. Often, conversations between institutions are framed as, "We want to know what you're doing so we can build on it," or "Here's what we need your students to be able to do, so we're going to tell you what that is so then you can then match our expectations." And by instead working on a project together where we were all trying to learn the same thing and how that operates within our context, it completely eliminated all the rest of that sense of hierarchy from these conversations.

I found that incredibly useful and helpful, and it opened up a space for ancillary questions and conversations because we spent time together. Because once you're working together as a team and you respect the people that are in that research group, you'll talk about everything else, too, and I think that might be something to build on.

SW: Thank you Sharon, and thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.