

Episode 15: Shawna Ross and Douglas Dowland

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Shawna Ross and Douglas Dowland about their teaching and research, specifically their work on anxious pedagogies. Shawna and Douglas were guest editors for a special cluster on “anxious pedagogies” in *Pedagogy*, a journal on critical approaches to teaching literature, language, composition and culture. The special cluster focuses on the uncertainties and the personal and professional anxieties of teachers and students.

Shawna Ross is Assistant Professor of British Literature and the Digital Humanities at Texas A&M University. Her co-written publications include, “Using Digital Humanities in the Classroom and Reading Modernism with Machines.” Her work may be seen in *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, *The Journal of Interactive Pedagogy*, *The Journal of Modern Literature*, *Victorians* and *The Henry James Review*.

Douglas Dowland is associate professor of English at Ohio Northern University, where he was named 2018 professor of the year. His book, *Weak Nationalisms: Affect and Nonfiction in Postwar America*, was published in 2019. His essays on the resentments and generousities of academic life have appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*.

Shawna and Douglas, thank you so much for joining us.

SW: I was hoping we could start with your work on “anxious pedagogies.” This work addresses and theorizes anxiety, personal and professional anxieties. I've been happy to see, recently, the amount of attention in writing classrooms and research on mental health and de-stigmatizing mental health issues. This work is incredibly valuable to teaching and understanding our own lives. There's a great deal of vulnerability, but also opportunities for bringing teachers and students together in the writing classroom when talking about anxiety. Do you mind sharing more about how this work on anxious pedagogies got started and how you define and theorize anxious pedagogies?

SR: For me, anxious pedagogy really came out of a particular moment when I was listening to other teachers talk about teaching. This occurred back in January, 2017 when I was sitting in a bar room in Philadelphia conference of the Modern Language Association. I like to listen to common threads in these conferences, trying to figure out what ideas seem to thread across diverse panels and conversations. All of a sudden, I realized that people kept using this word anxious. I'm anxious about this, my students are anxious about that. I'm used to academic speaking about their various concerns with methodological approaches or scholarly trends.

*It's an understated or maybe even passive aggressive way to say your ideas are dangerous or I don't think your work is very good. I'm concerned. I'm concerned about your work. But in this case, I felt that the depressed political atmosphere after the 2016 election really kicked into high gear our existing awareness of problems with adjunct labor and student debt, the kind of problems that Lee Skallerup writes about in her contribution to the issue of *Pedagogy* that Doug*

and I had edited. But back in January 2017, I couldn't really define this anxiety. I could tell that it was pulsing everywhere in the conference though, and it seemed like a compelling term that conference goers kept going back to. It described their feeling about teaching at that moment. So I decided to organize a round table on the topic for the next year's conference, but it was really when I got started talking to Doug and he had an idea about doing a special issue on a topic that I began to have any solid idea about what was linking all of these anxieties.

DD: Shawna has made a very lucid point. As academics, we go to conferences for many reasons, but one of the reasons we go is to demonstrate our writing and to learn of new venues that we want to think about it one way to apprentice ourselves in, and when a conference goes well, you get that warm feeling that comes from being heard and comes from listening to others, meeting up with old friends and breaking new ground. So much like the composition classroom, that warm feeling is something of a rarity, and I think we should ask ourselves why.

Shawna was incredibly perceptive in coming up with anxious pedagogies as a concept. For me, there's anxiety in everything that we do, and yet we use methods which I might claim our anxieties themselves, as ways of avoiding it. The affective turn in literary and cultural criticism can give us a vocabulary to unpack that, but I saw the work we were doing in the special issue of *Pedagogy* as taking that one step further. With our contributors, we could almost destabilize the boundary between the parts of our lives for academics, research, teaching, service, and in doing so, also help students to see the interconnectedness of both reading and writing in theirs in the academic work they're doing, in the more work they do in the traditional sense, but also in their personal lives.

For me, anxious pedagogies is a way of not only talking about something that is essentially the elephant in the classroom – anxiety – it's also a way for us to connect teaching pedagogy to this broader thing that we talk about when we talk about the affective turn, which is coming up not only through literary criticism, but a vast interdisciplinary field that attempts to understand the broader cultural politics of emotion.

SW: I always like hearing more about where these ideas and concepts come from and then also how these theories look practically in the classroom. Douglas, you mentioned how anxiety is often the elephant in the room, and I would add worry, fear, panic and stress are probably always present in the writing classroom as well. Do you mind talking about how you approach and invite conversations on the topic of anxiety with your students?

DD: This week, I asked my freshman writing students to tell me what their high school teachers told them about college. I was told that English professors are strict, that they do not like humor, and that they expect you to memorize and follow all the rules. Those were the three things that they told me. Can you perceive what weight they come to the freshman composition classroom with, with those three ideas in mind? They come to college saturated with an anxious discourse and that doesn't even include the more practical matters of their lives. So one way of approaching this is to say, let's talk about anxiety. I wouldn't necessarily use that word in the classroom, but I do, for instance, ask sophomore students to go back to the etymology of the word that I mentioned at the beginning of my essay in the special issue of *Pedagogy*.

What do you “press tight” when you read? What “burdens” you when you write? I find it difficult not to be authentic when I hear those responses, and those responses, maybe one out of a hundred can open up broader anxieties that are beyond my skillset. But in ninety-nine of those students, they leave the classroom a little relieved and maybe a little more confident in their ability to converse about something very close to them, but otherwise might be inaccessible to us. So if you were to say, let's be very practical about this, I would be very upfront about it and I would simply ask students, because they are always willing to tell you what they have learned before in terms of the rules of writing, which can be just as much of a mountain to climb as it is learning to acclimate oneself to the college environment because of course we know that English professors are not always strict.

SR: For me, I try to get away from that fear and panic by making myself as the teacher seem real and a little bit less staged, that we're not all of these stuffed shirts. And it's not because I think my personality is interesting, it's just because being vulnerable to a robot or to somebody who you see as just someone who's doling out your grade is very difficult. When I try to broach the topic of anxiety with my students, I try not to hide behind my own expertise in communication. I don't want to use my professional training to turn away from admitting the complexity of the ideas that come up when we talk about what bothers us or what worries us.

For me, I think eloquence is not always effective when you're trying to connect with students. So being authentic means not rehearsing what I'm going to say or sometimes not knowing what I'm going to say, which is scary sometimes for me. For example, this semester, I'm teaching a class on Jane Eyre and its afterlives. We were discussing the influence of the romantics on Bronte's representations of dreams, and a student asked me if I had dreams about Jane Eyre and that just kind of knocked me for a loop. I confessed that “no, I didn't dream about Jane Eyre per se, but I had nightmares about teaching it.”

I allowed myself to perform my vulnerability by giving a really rambling answer and to portray my own sense of confusion as I slowly came around to admitting that. Even though I've taught the novel a handful of times, I've taught in the undergraduate classroom for 15 years, no amount of preparation can protect you from risk. This is very much like the position taken by Amber Pouliot, who's one of the other writers in our special issue, and she calls this a radical honesty.

SW: I like seeing these moments and opportunities that could connect teachers and students in the classroom. Talking about anxiety is one of them. I also think talking about failure and framing failure as a positive instead of a negative and as a learning opportunity and a point for growth is important to do as teachers, especially in the writing classroom. I encourage students to take risks through writing and in terms of talking about failure, I like to draw on my own experiences as a writer and I like to share my writing process and rough drafts. I'm curious as to whether either of you talk about your own writing and how that becomes an entry point to conversations about anxiety with students.

DD: I do think that there is a component when we talk about at least in the composition classroom, about using peer reviewed resources, talking about how peer review is very necessary, but also it's a very human experience. The same thing goes with revision. What I ask students to revise may not be the same as what another professor asks to revise, but again, we are

not so strict as to there being one motive perfect revision every time. And so the writing process I think we have to admit in the classroom is as anxious for us as it is for them. To go back to Shawna's great analogy with MLA, one of the things that we're always doing is we're putting our writing on display and we go through all sorts of equipment and we go through all sorts of processes to prepare ourselves, but we all know that at the moment that Q&A comes up, basically anything can happen and the best thing we can do is listen to our anxieties, understand that that's always an anxious moment, and then maybe to playfully roll with it.

SR: Doug, I just really loved your use of the word display, and I really think that's what I tried to do as a teacher to unmask my own writing process as profoundly messy. So I like to use my own office, for example, as a staging area where they can see all of my own writing that I have torn apart, or I show them how I've gotten peer review from editors, blind readers, colleagues. I show them my very messy Zotero bibliographies. I try sometimes to let the evidence of my messy writing process speak for itself to show them that if they think that I'm a success, that I have published books and articles and I'm a professor, well, that didn't take being perfect.

SW: I'd like to end by turning this a bit to the act of teaching, reading and writing. How do anxious pedagogies make us see and understand reading and writing differently and perhaps even teach reading and writing in new and more effective ways?

SR: I like to go Freudian, honestly. My training is in 19th and 20th century literature especially that kind of turn of the century moment. At this moment, the way that writers and readers were understanding anxiety at the moment was really through the theories of Sigmund Freud, so I like to dip from the questions of method and writing to the particular ideas that were current in my particular field of my subset of my literary training. For me, Freud's idea that writers use their texts, use their writing to work out unacknowledged conflicts.

It could often be reductive. If you're just using it to say that, "Hey look, we know the biography of this author. They had a hang up and here it is in the novel, yay." That's not always very helpful, but if you start with the core idea that writers are bothered by something and that's what motivates them to write, then it's a pretty easy lateral move to ask students what they think these problems are that are worth writing about. When I'm teaching composition and students have to brainstorm a topic for an essay, I ask students that over the next week, if they're feeling some kind of writer's block, pay attention to their emotional reactions. What's upsetting them? Freud emphasizes dreams and jokes, but I emphasize irritation and anger. A negative emotion can be a brilliant indicator that some new idea is floating at the surface of their minds.

So as a result, negative emotions are not used to become very cynical or to exaggerate the problems of the world, but instead, negative emotions are seen as flags that remind us about what we value, what holds meaning for us. So if you let anxiety guide what you're writing about, then writing becomes more than an empty exercise. Grammar and structure and citation or research, it's really quite close to our lives. And the journal issue that Doug and I edited, Brandon Walsh similarly advocates for exploring frustration as a positive experience. And Katie Dyson uses the word attunement to describe this process of using anxiety to become more aware of yourself in the world around you. So ultimately for me, what this means in terms of anxiety is that anxiety indicates the presence of something that matters deeply to you and something that we can use,

techniques that we learn in the classroom to strengthen it or protect it or communicate that with others.

DD: I want to pick up on this idea of attunement because it's something that we do in the act of writing just as much as we do in the act of teaching writing. As instructors of writing, we have a broad vantage point that many don't. We see students from the entire swath of the university community and who are often brand new to the university community. The work we do in our initial assignments is to start tuning the instrument of the writing classroom. We feel out the competencies students bring, we rev them up for assignments, we use rubrics to interpret their performance, and this is of course the same thing that we do when we ask students to write.

We ask them to make the warrant and to support the evidence and every other element of the rhetorical situation is really a matter of becoming attuned to yourself as the writer and attuned to writing as a process. When they cut and paste and build in transitions and do all the work that they do in the act of writing, they are attuning themselves to their subject, they're attuning themselves to the expectations that they have and how they'll be evaluated, but they're also making larger adjustments and attunements to how they perceive themselves. I think the writing classroom is like a room full of musicians tuning their instruments.

There's an anxiety that we don't sound right, but in that way, anxiety is the point. As I look at all of the contributors to our special issue, what I see them doing is taking anxiety, which something we often feel like a negative weight that can bear down upon us, and we are flushing out the positive. We are flushing out anxiety as a profound moment of energy that we can then use in virtually any way that we choose. But to bring this back down into the writing classroom, what I would say, and writing studies more broadly, is that writing is always a rehearsal. We are always working towards something in the act of writing, and therefore it should be something that always has, even if it's an anxious energy, a positive energy that comes from it and sustains us moving forward.

SW: Thank you, again, Shawna and Douglas, and thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. You can find that Shawna and Douglas's cluster on anxious pedagogies online. It's Volume 19, Issue 3 of Pedagogy. Until next time.