

Episode 136: Sid Dobrin

Transcript

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

In this episode, Sid Dobrin talks about artificial intelligence and writing, eco-composition, ecocriticism, augmented reality, the Trace Innovation Initiative, and post-human theory. Sid Dobrin is professor and chair of the Department of English at the University of Florida. His research focuses on three distinct but overlapping subjects, the ecological properties of writing, ecocriticism, and eco-composition, including questions of oceanic criticism and the relationship between writing and emerging technologies, including questions of contemporary digital and visual screen culture. Dobrin is also Director of the Trace Innovation Initiative, a research hub that studies emerging writing technologies such as augmented reality and virtual reality applications, comic forms at scholarship, writing, ecology, and other cool stuff. Dobrin has been named a digital thought leader by Adobe, and he serves as chair of the American Sport Fishing Association's Advocacy Committee.

Sid, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your research and teaching interests include ecocriticism and technologies such as artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and virtual reality. Can you talk about your research on AI and how emerging technologies influence your approach to teaching writing?

SD: Yeah, absolutely. I want to make a little caveat about the AI thing. The University of Florida recently started a campus-wide artificial intelligence initiative and even though my interest in AI had begun prior to that initiative, UF is really pushing to become the national, if not global leader in applied AI education. AI conversations are very prevalent here right now. I have a new collection coming out with Parlor Press soon about artificial intelligence and the humanities, so it's something I've been working on and thinking a lot about lately from a variety of different angles. In terms of my compositional background and how I think about writing and how I think about AI, one of the things that's framing my thinking these days is that those of us, particularly working in digital humanities, there are two ways we can talk about artificial intelligence and I suppose retroactively, two ways we could be talking about any kind of emerging technology. I know it's very reductive, but I tend to think about artificial intelligence from the composition side and from the humanity side, from what we might call the theoretical position where a lot of us are thinking about how is AI going to be used, what are the critiques of AI, how is it going to be implemented? Then the other part of that is, and this is driven by UF's AI initiative, how do we apply AI? How are those of us working in the humanities and in composition going to actually use AI in the work that we're doing? I think there are a lot of different avenues there for how that's going to happen.

I do want to offer also a caveat here that with my role as chair, I have not taught very many undergraduate courses in the last several years. However, two years ago I taught a course that I am also teaching beginning this fall called Digital Literacy in the Humanities. We'll be taking up AI from these perspectives in that class. We'll be talking a lot about how is it that we're thinking about AI and how are we thinking about AI as a writing environment? A lot of the work that I

do, and particularly with my graduate students, is talking a lot about how augmented reality, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, these are new writing environments. This is where writing and communication takes place. With augmented reality in particular, we spend a lot of time working with our students, graduate and undergraduate. How do you the applied into that? How do you write AR apps that are going to have some kind of value? How are they going to become critical?

Through the Trace Innovation Initiative, which I'll talk about later, we developed a concept called augmented reality criticism, and how can we use augmented reality as a writing space to do the critical work that we do in composition, that we do in the humanities? We're going to be doing some of the same kinds of things with AI and thinking about how we as humanity scholars can be critics of artificial intelligence. One of the things I'll be talking about with my students in a couple of weeks when we talk about AI is that artificial intelligence tends to get this sort of negative position in both comp and within the humanities. When we really start to look at where does that negative idea come from, it really is coming from the humanities because all the bad press, all of the Imagine, Sky, Nat AI, iRobot, all of the stuff, these are all artists and writers that are creating this cultural positioning of AI. The humanities is playing a big role in how we understand AI, but then when we flip it and we look at how AI's going to affect our research, we know that AI is a very powerful tool, and we tend to get caught up in very limited views of what AI does, facial recognition data kind of work. But we're in the humanities; we work with language. Natural language processing is not just the linguistics approach, it's also a writing approach. A lot of my own research projects now are very much tied to NLP (Natural Language Processing) strategies. I think that how it affects my teaching, teaching and writing is also thinking about how do we use AI in the construction of AI?

I work a lot thinking about and writing about bot writers. I know that in the latest issue of *Composition Studies*, the 50th anniversary issue, Chris Anson brings back up the important question of automated writing grading and also brings up the issue of how we as teachers are going to address the idea of bot writers. We're surely going to see students turning in bot-written essays. What does that do, not just for how we think about plagiarism, but also who is the writer? What does that do for subjectivity? What does that do for agency when bot writers are not just writing the stuff we're reading out there in social media and in the newspapers and other forms, but what happens when our students are using bots to write? A lot of that meta conversation, that theoretical conversation is important. I think that applied conversation of how we're going to use it, what are we going to make with AI, what are we going to do with AI becomes really important to writing teachers.

SW: Are there any paths you'd like to see teacher-scholars take up when studying artificial intelligence and composition?

SD: I don't know if there's anything I want to see. I mean, that's almost like, do I want the bot to take over or things like that? I will be honest, I wish we were a little more open to the potential of what AI can do for comp, and that we had more people really digging into how the AI could be applied in comp. Because I know for instance, whether it's in my department or whether within the discipline, the moment that we start talking about automatic writing assessment and those sorts of things, everybody's bristles go up that that's not teaching writing, that's policing.

The whole response that went on for a couple of years ago about not using machine grading, those kinds of things. I get that; I'm on board with that kind of a resistance. But I think by limiting our conversations that that's the only role AI is going to play in our lives as writing teachers. I think that's limiting.

SW: It sounds like you're trying to cast a future where artificial intelligence and writing isn't perceived negatively—the side that talks about the affordances of artificial intelligence to the teaching of writing isn't always present in current conversations.

SD: Well, frankly, that's a cultural shift. That's one of those things that's going to take time—that as junior faculty, as grad students are becoming more accustomed to and adept at the use of AI and what will emerge, and then the rest of us, the old writing teachers retire and put our number two pencils and things away—that'll change over time. That's just how culture works. Those of us in the older guard of things will have to quit defending the traditional idea of the essay or whatever else we hold dear as part of our writing pedagogy. But this is nothing new. You look at Dennis Baron's work or somebody, we've been talking about the changes in writing technologies forever, and how when the pencil, the blackboard, the printing press, you name it, everybody who was already doing things one way complained, "Oh, this is going to ruin writing. This is going to ruin thinking. People are going to have access to knowledge they shouldn't have." It's the standard response to a new technology. Give it time. We'll all be dealing with AI one way or the other. Most of us will embrace it and will create all kinds of new writing pedagogies. It does beg the question: how nostalgic are we as a discipline to hang on to what we think writing is, how writing ought to be taught, and what comes next? I'm a big fan of that "what comes next" question.

SW: Sid, your teaching and research also explore ecocomposition. I'm thinking about your article almost 20 years ago, "Breaking Ground in Ecocomposition." How do you define ecocomposition and how do you invite students to explore ecocriticism and oceanic criticism in your writing classes?

SD: You're digging deep man, 20 year old research, right? Yeah, eco comp—and ecocriticism kind of evolved out of eco composition. I will go ahead and give a plug that Madison Jones at University of Rhode Island, and I have a new collection coming out with NCTE called *Rhetorical Ecologies*. They really look at a lot of that history of where the ecological turn in comp came from. For me, it really has two kinds of definitions. One was, the original definition was basically how are we writing about nature? How are we writing about the environment? It sort of took those compositional elements that we were learning as theorists and really kind of situated them within a new environmentalist turn. As CCCC was formed, I think in '96, '97, it really was there thinking about how we as writing theorists also theorize how we're writing about and creating the subject of nature.

But at the same time, for me, just because my work tends to be less pedagogical and more theoretical, I was also very interested in how we we could take ecological methodologies, methodologies that focused on relationships between subject and environment and not necessarily natural environment, but the places in which we write and how could we formulate and theorize how writing happens ecologically? That was really more of the ecological turn that I

was interested in, was how can we really think about writing as a component of ecological relationships? Now, the ecocriticism stuff's always just been a side interest to me, and ever since grad school and in fact in that same issue of composition studies that Chris Anson's piece on AI is in there, I've got a piece about the evolution of ecological thinking and composition.

For me, there was always environmental humanities. People are always starting to ask, what can we do in environmental crisis? I was always very interested in talking about the environment, talking about ecology. How do I bring those things to classes? Again, sort of a twofold. One is subject area. I spend a lot of my time when I have students reading about things, reading about how we're defining and describing environmental ecological issues, and how the writing and the rhetoric affect what we know and how we know. But I also spend time talking about the ecological relationships of our writing. How does our writing rhetorically circulate Jim Ridolfo's concept of rhetorical velocity? Just how our writing moves, and particularly in a circulatory digital world that we live in, that notion of ecology and what happens in that relationship of writing to circulation and how changes occur. Students really like to sit back and kind of engage. What does it mean to enter into an ecology, into enter a communicative relationship? Spending a lot of time again, doing that sort of twofold, meta conversation, philosophical, theoretical conversation about how do we think about this? But then that applied of how do we make this work for our own writing?

SW: You serve as the director of the Trace Innovation Initiative at the University of Florida. Can you tell us a bit more about this initiative and the projects that you have going on?

SD: Yeah, I'm glad you brought that up. We started Trace Innovation Initiative in the Department of English at UF probably about eight years ago. The way it came about was I had a group of really, really talented grad students, some of whom were coders, some of whom were hackers, some of whom were video editors, some of whom were artists. We asked the question, how is it that we talk about emerging technology, but we have the technology foisted on us? We're always working with hand-me-down technology, right? First, it's got to be adapted elsewhere. What happens if we start thinking about how we want our technologies to unfold? We got a little bit of support from the chair and a little bit of support from the college. Basically, we had this tiny little closet office, and what we started talking about was, how are augmented reality, how is virtual reality at the new writing environment?

We started applying for some grants. One of the grad students was very interested in data mining. We ended up getting, for that year, the largest NEH grant for technology app development—developed Mass Mine, which was a social media data mining app that we built. We got a handful of other small grants, and we were doing a lot of production in augmented reality building, augmented reality apps that we created a concept called Augmented Reality Criticism, where we were taking the critical work of the humanities of composition in rhetoric and literally writing apps that would allow you to do place-based critique. Some of the examples were some of our grad students had several undergrad classes augment a local natural space with the local narratives that were not being told on the signage there. We did a big project that took us a couple of years at SeaWorld where we created an alternative tour at SeaWorld, an AR app that would give you the information that SeaWorld was not giving you. It was right around the time *Blackfish* came out. You could walk into the penguin exhibit, and you would find out where

their eggs are coming from and things like that. It wasn't editorial, it was fact-based, but we knew that we'd get in trouble for it. But the intent wasn't necessarily to augment SeaWorld. That was just a high publicity factor. The intent was to have a discussion about who owns cyberspace around a particular location, what critique can be leveled on a location. We did lots of those kinds of things. COVID killed us without being able to be here and talk about stuff.

The real beauty of Trace has always been a collaborative space where grad students and faculty can play video games and talk about game studies and coding, and then how can we take this into publication or pedagogy or grant application? Fortunately, and I'm very excited about this over the course of COVID, our dean sees the value in this and gave us a very large lab space that we have now populated with furniture and computers and screens, and we have more faculty involved beginning this fall. We're going to start those conversations again, and they're going to be tied to a lot of environmental humanities, digital humanities. We've got a podcast booth going in. We've got a video studio, we've got a UX station, we've got Victor Del Hierro on faculty here now doing sound study stuff with us, Laura Gonzalez doing UX stuff and tech comp stuff with us. We've got a group of both grads and undergrads and other faculty who are eager to start having these conversations again. We'll be moving forward with lots of new publications and grants and all kinds of opportunities. The thing that's best about Trace in the past is a lot of our dissertations from our grad students have grown out of the conversations that go on in the Trace room.

SW: In 2015, you wrote an edited collection called Writing Posthumanism, Posthuman Writing. What do you think posthumanism theory adds to writing studies and the teaching of writing, and is there a particular chapter in that collection that you find yourself going back to?

SD: Again, you're going to all the old stuff, making me dig deep here. Yeah, you're right. It's a huge question because first of all, posthumanism itself is a huge question because on the one hand, and this comes up in the collection, certainly, a lot of the conversation around Posthumanism and the Posthumanism thought is tied directly to emerging technologies. A lot of the conversations about the Posthuman have to do with emerging tech. On the other hand, posthumanism has a lot to do with other forms of the non-human. One of the big components of that collection are the animal studies pieces particularly early in that book. Lynn Worsham's piece, Diane Davis's piece, lots of animal studies stuff that goes on there. For me, what Posthumanism really brings to the overall conversation at a core level is the destabilizing and the disruption of the naturalized subject. Particularly, when I tie in my thinking about eco-composition and ecocriticism, that sort of human-centric approach to what the world is, the subject needs to be dismantled there, or the primacy of the human subject needs to be dismantled.

Everything I do with emerging technology, whether it's AI, AR, VR has a lot to do with what does this technology do in creating what comes next for the human? Whether that's from thinking about technology as a human additive augmentation, or whether that's about what else has subjectivity. To me, comp and rhet-comp and writing studies, it's always been about the subject, the writing subject. The writing subject to me is such a problematic concept. Even the concept of the student subject that what posthumanism brings in is the ability to say—that notion of subject is so unstable that we can't really rely on that notion, and we create master narratives

about human primacy as we are the only writers, and we our writing changes the world. Yeah, well, what about bot writing? What about signal-using animals? What about all these other things that we're starting to recognize are different kinds of ways of thinking about subjectivity? That to me is the real key there.

But you asked about the piece that I go back to. That's tough, admittedly. Honestly, I don't go back to that yet. Once I get a collection on the shelf, I'm onto what comes next, and a lot of those pieces really stand out for me. Of all the collections I've done, that was one that I got. I'm proud of all the work I've done, and I'm really proud of the contributors I've had in all of my collections. But that one for some reason really stands out. Besides having just incredible scholars like Worsham, and Davis, and Ballif, and Kate Birdsall and Julie Drew, Kyle Jensen, Kristie Fleckenstein, I mean, these are just incredible scholars. Sean Morey, Jeff Rice, I think it's the Morey piece that I go back to the most. But I have to admit that's probably because maybe since that or before, he's who I work with the most off that list, and so he and I talk about stuff all the time. Coming back to that "tailed" piece, the long tail piece is part of our regular conversation about such things. I don't want to pick favorites from that collection or all collections, but I have to admit that's probably the one that I talk about the most.

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