

Episode 123: Spencer Bennington

Transcript

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

In this episode, Spencer Bennington talks about martial arts and teaching writing, Eastern rhetorics and embodied rhetoric, and intertextuality in hip hop and contemporary music.

Spencer Todd Bennington (he/him) is an instructor in the university writing program at Virginia Tech and also teaches online for the University of South Florida and James Madison University. Spencer earned his PhD in Rhetoric and Composition in 2020, but he has been teaching writing in higher education for over a decade. Now, Spencer's current pedagogical pet project is a course he calls "Rap Rhetorics." The class asked students to explore inter-intellectuality within various hip hop discourse communities and to write about the connections between music and America's history of racist/anti-racist beliefs and policies. In addition to his interest in teaching writing through music and hip hop culture, Spencer has a deep connection with Tae Kwon Do and frequently participates in interdisciplinary martial arts studies and research endeavors. His dissertation research about the rhetorical reinventions of Tae Kwon Do will appear soon in an upcoming issue of *Rhetoric Review*.

Spencer, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Let's start with your story. How did you get interested in teaching writing and the field of rhetoric and composition?

SB: Yeah, of course. Well, Shane, thanks so much for having me here. I'm always happy to talk about teaching and learning. It's funny, this conversation comes up a lot because I always have my students at the beginning of any semester ask me anything like, you know, a Reddit post or whatever. And they always say, "Why did you study English? Why did you want to become a professor?" And I say, you know, when I started my undergraduate career, I knew I was good at English. I wanted to write, I really enjoyed writing and I had a mentor at the time who steered me away actually from English education. I thought, "Wow, I like writing, I'll teach writing to high schoolers. It'll be great." And he said, "No, if you do English education, you're just going to be making bulletin boards for four years." And I was like, "Well, that doesn't sound very fun. I don't think that's why I came here." He encouraged me to do a straight English literature degree at a pretty conventional liberal arts college. And the thing about that is when you graduate with a BA in English, you pretty much have two options.

This is what I tell my students: you can go to graduate school or you can get that barista job at Starbucks. And so, well, honestly, I did both, but I went to grad school. It was there that someone was like, "Hey, you seem competent and are a person, would you like to stand in front of a group of freshmen and teach them English and how to write?" I was like, "Yeah, that sounds actually pretty fun." And so it was fun. I got to learn a lot about not only composition and rhetoric as a field—Radford is where I did my master's, Radford University in Radford, Virginia—but I learned a lot about the field and I also learned about best practices in terms of teaching writing.

And it was a rocky road to be sure, I feel like it is for most TAs, but, that's when it really settled for me, that I was like, "Oh, I'm invested in this." And so, when it came time to decide, you know, now that I have my master's in English, I feel like I have two choices: I can pursue that PhD or get that barista job at Starbucks. But no, in all sincerity, I saw the move to get the PhD in rhetoric and composition as a professionalization move. Meaning that was, there was a gate, there was a barrier for me to be able to do what I wanted to do, which was teach writing full time and get paid livable wage and also health benefits. And that barrier in my mind was the degree, the PhD.

SW: Spencer, so you also have a background in Tae Kwon Do, which influences your approach to teaching. Talk to me more about this and how you see your martial arts interest and background intersecting with teaching and rhetoric and composition.

SB: That's a pretty natural question for me. It's funny, when I was on the job market, you have to frequently submit teaching philosophies or statements of teaching ideology of some sort. And mine frequently started with the idea that the first classrooms I taught in, you know, weren't lecture halls and didn't have PowerPoint projectors. They were dusty church basements and old gym mats, and the truth of the matter is I started teaching Tae Kwon Do when I was like 16, 17, as soon as I could drive myself. I had a black belt, I was going all around my hometown and the local county area and teaching martial arts to anyone who would pay me really. I was teaching children as young as three or four. I was teaching, you know, semi troubled teens or people that couldn't ordinarily pay for martial arts lessons through the parks and rec department. I would even teach the elderly.

I would teach specifically, you know, self-defense classes for audiences that wouldn't traditionally participate in combat sports for martial arts those few years, while I was still finishing high school. I stayed in my hometown to do my undergraduate degree. That time I believe really provided my pedagogical foundation for who I became in a writing classroom. And some basic things, I'll just get this out of the way: first, when you teach a sport or when you coach a sport or theater is the same way you develop a projection. You have to project your voice. You're sort of yelling at a gym full of kids. One other thing I'll say specifically about martial arts and I think good coaches in a variety of arenas do this, but you also have to naturally become an orator.

I told you about the diverse audiences that I was teaching. You have to think immediately about how to communicate the same information, how to kick someone in the face, to a kid or a very old person at the same time, appealing to diverse audiences. Becoming that orator, becoming a good coach or a teacher also in that area meant becoming a good technical communicator because when people are running and jumping and kicking, they don't have a lot of time to process a paragraph's worth of information. You have to be able to shout maybe five words at them to get them to adjust their bodily technique and focus in on their training again. And I think that those are some sort of basic communication skills that come from that sort of coaching aspect that came to my teaching immediately. The way that I communicated with my students was almost from a persona that wasn't a traditional teacher.

SW: You mentioned pedagogical foundations. When you started learning more about composition theory and pedagogies, was there one pedagogy or theory that you felt more connected to given your history with martial arts?

SB: Yeah, that's a really interesting question. You know, I had a bunch of notes jotted down, but I'm not going to talk about any of them. I'm going to talk about this idea that just freshly came to my mind, which is there's a sort of spectrum when we teach composition, when we teach writing of any kind, really. The supposed pedagogy back in the day was that through rote repetition and mimicking style, that you would become a better writer. And the better writer of course, is a very select few of white hetero wrote men. And that's what we identify as good style from those classics. Once we moved closer toward a process pedagogy, something that really is more design-oriented and an iterative approach to teaching writing, and one that is rhetorically founded on this idea that things should change and be revised based on purpose and audience and genre. A lot of people threw out this idea with the current traditional pedagogy, but I'll be the devil's advocate here and say that one thing that you do learn from traditional martial arts is there is a lot to be said about getting your reps in.

And I have circled almost all the way back to some of those older approaches in my, in my teaching. Now, I'm planning a composition class for the fall, and one of the things that I want students to be able to do is to be able to talk eloquently about race and racism in America. And so, if I want them to do that in a 15-week semester, I'm going to ask them to do that in writing at least 15 times that semester. It's just one of those things that I think once we moved toward this more process-oriented approach, people started to say, "Oh, great. I can just kind of throw all of these, the smattering of things at my students, and they're going to pick it up and they're going to be able to transfer it to all their other classes." And that's just not true. You need to pick those few core things and figure out ways to, like I said, get those reps in.

Now the flip side of that same conversation is that martial arts also teaches us or taught me anyway about process and revision and patience and self-control because when you're learning to fight, you get beat up a lot, like a lot. I got kicked in the face a lot, and it's never pleasant, but the more it happens, the more you develop coping mechanisms, hopefully in a safe gym space that is healthy for you and the people around you to be able to deal with that kind of contact, right? That sort of confrontation. I think a lot of teachers forget that writing students need practice building up that kind of resilience as well, especially in terms of giving and receiving criticism or feedback. And that was something that was hidden for me for a while, because I took for granted that I learned some of those skills from my martial arts background. The way that I write drives people up a wall, because I will write a draft, get to the last line of the draft, use that as the starting line of the next draft and I'll do that maybe 15 times.

I'm a radical revisionist. I love going back and rewriting and I make my students do it. I don't make them do it on really long passages, but I make them do it on, say, a paragraph over and over and over again, because there is value in sort of both sides of that coin. And to circle back to kind of a philosophical idea that connects to some of the things that I study in terms of nonwestern rhetorics, martial arts, especially Tae Kwon Do is rooted in this Taoist idea of a one world system, meaning even if we locate binary oppositions in the world around us in wrong,

right, hot, cold, good, evil, we have to understand that they are constantly in flux and it's a dynamic system of harmony of opposites.

SW: You're moving us into this non-Western orientation to teaching writing and I know your philosophy includes embracing Eastern rhetorics and embodied rhetoric. How do Eastern rhetorics inform your approach to teaching?

SB: Yeah, and that's a great question, Shane. And I want to start by saying when I was a graduate student working on my PhD, I sort of had this rough idea. Okay, I've done Tae Kwon Do for, at that point, half my life, right? And I understood it to be rhetorical in that it was a practice that was designed for a particular audience in a particular context for a particular, in this case, political purpose. And once I began to understand that this thing that I'd been doing for half my life that had become a part of my body was rhetorical, I said, "Okay, well, that's probably worth a dissertation." So, I'm saying this because Tae Kwon Do's origins in Korea and the amount that it borrowed culturally from China, my research originally in non-Western rhetorics led me specifically to the work of Xing Lu.

She was one of the first that published a monograph on ancient Chinese rhetorics. And the reason that's important is because one of the first things she says is that up until now, white scholars have basically said, there is no rhetorical tradition in Africa or Asia, which hopefully at this point in history, we can just identify as horribly racist and not like not actual scholarship. She wrote this book that was this amazing collection of these different cultures at different time periods in ancient pre-China, really warring states period. And the two that I was most interested in were things that came out of the Taoist tradition and the Confucian tradition, because these were heavily preserved or referenced in martial arts manuals. And that was going to be my area of focus for the dissertation.

Now I say all of that because after doing that dissertation research, I did incorporate some of these specifically ancient Chinese rhetorical ideas in my teaching at the time. I'll give you a couple examples. I think many of us try to teach our students about the rhetorical situation and when we do, we usually try to visualize it. And I'm sure everyone right now is picturing that handy dandy triangle. Everybody's got a triangle in their head. Maybe there's a circle around that triangle, maybe a real fancy drew circle around it. But we have these ready at hand visuals to explain these concepts that are abstract; they're entirely abstract. And I think that at least in the Western tradition, we've sort of had it beaten into our brain that the rhetorical situation that's that dang triangle, okay? But what I found interesting was to explain some concepts that maybe didn't come from the Greco Roman tradition or the European enlightenment tradition to some of my students.

And then I would challenge them. We'd have a little drawing day, I'd bust out the crayons, and I'd say, "Okay, draw the rhetorical situation. What does it look like? Why are these relationships the way they are? Why are you visualizing it this way?" And then I showed them some that I had readymade, of course the, the handy dandy triangle. But then I drew one in the, the image of the yin yang symbol, a Taijitu, and explained to them how that image of dynamism and some of those philosophical ideas from Taoism that I was explaining a minute ago relate to rhetorical situations. And then, I took an even more Western approach, leaned into a diagram of an atom,

using an atom to really get at the granularity of the five canons of rhetoric being involved there and things like delivery and all of that.

That was one way of just bringing in some theoretical concepts that are outside of the Western rhetorical tradition and just mixing them in, because the ultimate point that I want to arrive at here is that I've kind of gotten to the point where it's not so useful to think of Eastern rhetorics, Western rhetorics. I think, Western is a useful identifier in so much as it is the dominant rhetorical tradition, at least in America, and to tell alternative rhetorical narratives and rhetorical histories, it's what's important. It's not so important to me that I talk about Eastern rhetorics or any other particular locale, but I am very much focused on non-Western rhetorical traditions and how those traditions, and at least what I'm doing right now, how they are made manifest in American history.

One of the more interesting ways you might not expect is that there are Eastern rhetorical traditions that through martial arts media made their way to be embodied in hip hop culture in, in 1970s, 1980s, 1990s America. So the class I'm developing now is actually a way for composition students to explore a history of racist assimilationist and anti-racist beliefs and policies in America through interrelated texts, like speeches of Malcolm X and songs through Wu-Tang Clan, you know, and, and these in their own ways are rooted in non-Western rhetorics. It's been a fantastic journey. So that's kind of where I'm at now.

SW: I'm thinking specifically about that course now. Is there a history of that tradition that you're excited to teach and have conversations or facilitate dialogue with students about this semester?

SB: Yeah, absolutely. So, one project that I'm going to have my students do is rooted in a piece of scholarship by James Porter, it's intertextuality in the discourse community. And I find that a really accessible piece of scholarship for students because it sort of opens their eyes to citation practices and how bits of texts are borrowed and reused and sampled, if you will, in different historical documents throughout history.

It provides a nice foundation for a project where I'm going to ask my students to investigate intertextuality through, uh, American rhetorics of oral speeches through the likes of MLK, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, et cetera, and find where some of those speeches have been sampled or referenced in hip hop through the historical periods or more contemporary music and investigate how the ideas are morphing and changing over time due to a historical context.

So, it's going to be a heavily research-based sort of thing. Ironically, I'm going to have them write a script as if they're reading on a podcast. And what I'm asking them to do is turn in something that if they read it in full is maybe three to five minutes, but in the spirit of the class and in the spirit of hip hop, I'm going to tell them to actually record maybe a 30-second clip of audio, highlight that in the script. And then I'm going to go into the lab—mind you, this is a class that I'm going to have like six sections of—so I'm going to try to remix all of those different little audio samples to create this intertextual dialogue where I'm kind of interviewing my class. And the inspiration for that comes from the Dissect Music podcast on Spotify, and

particularly in the first season where the host analyzes Kendrick Lamar's album *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

There's a song on that album called "Mortal Man," where halfway through it's revealed that Kendrick is kind of in conversation with someone doing an interview, and it's none other than dead rapper, Tupac Shakur. And it's found audio that Kendrick was using and remixing to create this beautiful conversation about legacy and hip hop. And so that's kind of the starting point for my students to think, "Wow, there's all these different intellectual conversations happening throughout the decades and maybe I could pull one out and say something about it." So, we'll see how that goes.

I haven't done it yet, but to give you an example of one kind of thread they could pull on that connects some of these Eastern rhetorics. On my syllabus, my students will be listening to parts of some speeches from Malcolm X, particularly one that's pretty famous: "You can't hate the roots of the tree without hating the tree." And his last speech, after his home was firebombed from there. Now for historical reference here, I'm from Danville, Virginia, and what I found in my research is that there was this person now known as Clarence 13 X, who was a member of Malcolm X's congregation before Malcolm X left the nation of Islam. And I'm going to pause right there and just say that anything that the nation of Islam was teaching is non-Western rhetorical tradition. Um, so there's that influence right away. Now, Clarence 13 X joins the nation of Islam, converts, changes his name.

When Malcolm leaves and converts to Sunni Islam, Clarence 13 X decides that he's had enough with the nation of Islam's respectability politics. They wore those suits, and they condemned smoking, drinking, gambling, and Clarence 13 X thought it was a better approach to actually get in the streets, talk to the youth and try to connect with them on their level. And he adapted a lot of the teachings of the NOI and formed what's now known as The Nation of Gods and Earths or the Five-Percent Nation. And the basic premise of the Five-Percent Nation is that five percent of the Earth's population are poor righteous teachers. They're just trying to help, unfortunately, though, ten percent, these are the vultures, the blood suckers, and they try to manipulate everyone because they're greedy, they're only self-interested. So then there's that 85 percent out there who are just ignorant, just sitting around, waiting to decide which side of the fence they're going to be on.

This sort of idea was used to empower these impoverished black ghetto youth and give them the same sort of uplifting spirit that Malcolm X was inspiring everyone with when he was part of the nation. But to do it in such a way that allowed them to keep their street style, without having to change their identity, and without feeling ashamed to do the things that they wanted to do.

And so, The Nation of Gods and Earths never became a formalized religion. Instead, in the community, God is referenced to the true and living God is what they refer to the black man, the athletic black man. You can already see from that, if you read too far into the text, you could even call it a black supremacy group. The point of all of this is that these street preachers, these street prophets became the people who were educating these young kids who would otherwise be skipping school and missing out on lessons and whatnot. Some of the young kids, especially in the sort of Queens, New York area, that they would be educating would be the young Wu-Tang

Clan, just as an example, okay? And the more you listen to Wu-Tang Clan's music, the more you hear these references to the 120 Supreme lessons direct from the nation of Islam, the Supreme alphabet, Supreme mathematics. These are things that Clarence 13 X invented to adapt the nation of Islam's teachings for that new generation, that youth and Wu Tang is not alone. Busta Rhymes, Eric B. & Rakim, so many of the brand new being so many of these foundational hip hop artists, especially in the late eighties, early nineties, that began the kind of conscious movement were channeling these earlier non-Western texts.

And then it gets picked up again with Tupac, with Dead Prez, with J Cole, Kendrick Lamar, these famous rappers today. I know I just went off on a little tangent there, but the Five-Percent Nation is really, really interesting to me. I think it's such a fascinating bridge between these traditionally thought of Eastern or non-Western rhetorics and African American hip hop culture.

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