

Episode 140: Stacy Wittstock

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Stacy Wittstock talks about education studies, research methodologies, basic writing programs, institutional hierarchies, culturally responsive teaching, the myth of standardized English, and writing assessment.

Dr. Stacy Wittstock is the assistant director of composition and assistant professor in residence in the English department at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. She received her PhD in education and writing rhetoric and composition studies from the University of California, Davis. Her dissertation examined a basic writing program shared between a University of California campus and a community college revealing how material and ideological macrostructures including institutional power hierarchies and deficit perspectives on literacy and language shaped programmatic microstructures like curriculum, pedagogy, and faculty agency. Her research has appeared in research in the teaching of English and praxis, a writing center journal, and her forthcoming manuscript in the Journal of Basic Writing examines the epistemological and pedagogical dominance of the UC system's analytical writing placement exam in a basic writing course.

Stacy, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You received your PhD in education with an emphasis in writing rhetoric and composition studies from UC Davis. I imagine you were taking education classes as well as courses in rhetoric and composition, what do you think were some of the unique advantages to taking classes in education and being a part of this joint program in education and rhetoric and composition?

SW: Yeah, so you are right that I was taking classes in education as well as classes in rhetoric and writing studies. And so the university writing program at UC, Davis is separate from the English department. So I was working with faculty in the university writing program, and then I was also working with faculty in education. And this is my soapbox, but I feel like I don't feel like folks in rhetoric and composition get as much exposure to different kinds of methods, like research methods education as our field is increasingly moving towards in terms of our expectations for scholarship. More and more often journals are interested in getting more information, not just journals, but readers are interested in learning more about the methods you used in your study and understanding the methods for data analysis and for collecting data and all that stuff. And I think that we do a good job with qualitative methods in particular, but I think that there's just a lot of potential in partnering with education programs on exposing PhD and master's students to a wider range of different kinds of research methods. And I think that was the real benefit of my program, I think I counted at one point it was six or seven methods classes, and they weren't just like, here's how you do this thing. It was really thinking through the methodologies and why you would work with a certain population and maybe consider these methods or the ethics of data analysis or how we conduct interviews. I got to really dig in deep

into specific methods, like I took an interview methods class. I took quantitative methods classes, statistics classes.

We offered ethnography classes. And we had a research design class, and so I really got help in thinking about how to design my study. And so that's one of the things that I think was the best part of my program and the unique advantage to it was that I got to take a lot of methods classes. I think also the other thing for me in particular was the sense that you get from working with folks in education about where higher education sits in the broader ecology of education in our country or the system. And so it gave me a better sense in talking to my colleagues in education and classes, some of them had been teaching for 10, 15 years and came back for a PhD because they saw a need in their community. So I got to learn a lot through talking to them about literacy and language instruction in K-12 and how understanding that gives us a better sense of our students as they come into our first year writing classes.

And thinking about where our first year writing classes sit in this line of classes that they take about writing and reading and literacy. So I think I learned a lot in that way by taking literacy and language classes. And I think the other thing too is that I got exposure to learning sciences in particular. So in the education program at UC, Davis, there were I think three or four main emphasis areas. And my emphasis area within the school of education was learning in mind sciences. So it's like educational psychology, which made sense because I was interested in assessment and measurement and things like that and how students learn. And so that was the area that I was in. And I felt like it gave me a broader sense of writing assessment too or assessment generally, because I wasn't just getting it through the way that our field talks about assessment and it talks about writing assessment in particular, but I was also learning a lot from my colleagues. My colleagues who do big quantitative studies of huge, massive data sets from state testing and learning about how they think about validity and stuff like that. So I think that it helped me broaden my understanding of the research that I was doing, the things that I was interested in, and how we can learn from folks in education in what we do in writing studies. So I think there's a lot of interdisciplinary potential there.

SW: Let's talk about the research you were doing at UC Davis. Your dissertation focuses on institutional ethnographies to understand basic writing programs. I would love to hear more about that research and what you discovered. Basic writing programs—their visibility, presence and resources or lack thereof—are uniquely situated within institutions. Often tensions exist between basic writing programs and institutions because of this peculiarity. What led you to this work and was there something that stood out the most about institutional power hierarchies and perspectives on literacy and language?

SW: I think to give a very quick two second explanation of what my dissertation looked at, I looked at a cross institutional basic writing program. This was a program that had been outsourced to a local community college from a UC campus in 1993. So budget crisis in the UC system had eventually resulted in the decision to eliminate "remedial education" at the UC and to funnel it down into the "lower colleges", so the community colleges. And so what happened is basically these were students at this UC campus, I call it UC, Sierra, which is not a real institution but pseudonym. And these were UC, Sierra students who are being taught by California community college instructors on campus at UC, Sierra. So the community college

instructors would come on when they would teach these classes. The class is essentially designed entirely around this one exam. It's the UC wide analytical writing placement exam. And this exam is one way that determines whether students have met the UC system's entry level writing proficiency requirement. And so the entire course was ostensibly built to be a test preparation course, even though I think the writing program administrator and the program would not have agreed with that assessment of it. But the way the course was designed, they did eight essays in a 10-week quarter, and they were all based around this one exam and its structure. And the rubric for that exam was used for all assessment in the program and everything. And so what brought me into the study was that I was teaching the class that followed that class, and my students were traumatized by it because it was colloquially called a three-quarter course, that you would have to maybe take it three times before you would pass it.

I was really interested. I was like, what is this thing? I wanted to know more about it. And so I ended up digging in, figuring out who I needed to talk to and eventually designing a study around it. And so you mentioned that the basic writing programs are so interesting in their institutional situation, and that was very much the case with this program. It was centered in this limbo space between two different institutions and thereby the students and the faculty that worked in it were positioned similarly in this limbo where they went out for a second and then came back into the institution to continue with their writing education. So my main focus is I wanted to understand the forces that had made it so that this program looked the way it did, and I wanted to understand how those forces impacted what the program looked like in terms of its curriculum and assessment practices and pedagogy.

So my main focus was looking at, what I call these broader macrostructures, these are things like the social concept of literacy and language at the time, broader state perspectives on "remediation" or developmental writing as we would think of it now, institutional perspectives about language. And then Asa Winaway would say, racism and white supremacy, how are these macrostructures on institutional and outside of the institution impacting what happens in the classroom? So thinking about pedagogy, the curriculum of a program, how teachers are allowed to teach, the textbooks that they teach with and things like this. And so I thought the institutional ethnography really offered a perfect methodology for looking at this because it focuses so much on how the everyday experiences of a worker and the work that they do fit within these institutional hierarchies.

What I think that I ultimately learned through this about basic writing in particular is that it's really uniquely at the mercy of these outside forces. We're seeing this increasingly now with these large scale legislative moves in certain states. California is a good example of that with the passage of assembly bills 705 and 1705, which have changed the way that placement into developmental reading, writing, and math classes at the state's community college's work. And the result of that has been basically the elimination, broadly, of a lot of developmental education at the community colleges, for better or for worse. And we're seeing it also in legislation in Nevada through our Nevada State Higher Education Agency essentially saying that we had to mainstream all students. And so the turn there through agencies like Complete College America towards co-requisite models and cohort models and things like that.

So basic writing in particular, because it's transient, it fits in this limbo space where institutions really don't love that it exists, but they also want more students to be able to access college for enrollment or whatever reasons and so they have to exist. So it's like in this limbo position uniquely at the whims of changes in institutional mindset and so on. And that was largely what I ended up finding in the study was that when you dig through the decades of documents and you talk to the people who were there throughout the 24 years that the cross institutional program existed, it's a lot of interfacing with folks at the higher epicenters of power within the UC that ultimately ended up shaping what was going on in the program.

SW: Let's talk about your teaching. Your approach to teaching centers culturally responsive practices and linguistic justice. Can you talk more about how you approach teaching writing and what this looks like in your classroom?

SW: Yeah, so my primary focus as a teacher is emphasizing to students what they already have and what they can build on when they come to college. I do think that we often think that we are reeducating them when they come to college to college writing classes, like we are reintroducing them to things. And I don't take that approach, I take it more like I'm going to help you think about how the practices related to literacy and language and writing that you already have are going to help you, how you can build on those existing practices. Mold them into new habits, work them in new ways so that you can be successful in other college writing situations. So you can think about moving on to a workplace and the writing that you might do there, the writing that you're doing every day. So I focus a lot on the practices of successful writers.

I'm also just like, I've taught in a lot of really diverse large state institutions. UC, Davis is a really diverse institution, majority of our students were students of color. The majority of our students were... Well, I would say about 40 to 50% of our students were first generation. The majority of students on campus spoke a language other than English at home. And so we had a lot of linguistic and racial and cultural diversity that matched the state of California. And it's very similar at UNLV, which is one of the more diverse institutions in the US right now. So I focus a lot on making sure that there's representation across the readings that I assign, the types of assignments that I am assigning the possible topics. Making sure that they can see themselves potentially in the curriculum or build ways for them to explore things about themselves through their communities or things of interest or importance to them in my class.

So representation of themselves within the curriculum, but also thinking about that focus on, you can find things that matter to you personally or culturally or historically or within your communities to look at and research in my class. So in terms of assignments that might look like literacy narratives, I've often done literacy narratives in my classes. I also have, when I was at UC, Davis in particular, I was assigning a lot of discourse community research projects. And that to me was an important assignment because it was an opportunity for me to help them think in a writing across the curriculum mind of how to navigate different writing situations in classes and circumstances they might find themselves in the future. But I also saw it as an opportunity for me to say, "If you want to research the discourse practices of this group within your community, this is an opportunity for you to do that and learn a little bit more about yourself and how that has shaped who you are as a reader and a writer and a learner." So that's a lot of my approach to teaching writing, I think.

SW: Since your dissertation focused on institutional hierarchies and power, are you having these conversations with students about how power is situated and circulates within different systems?

SW: Yeah. We talk a lot about questioning the myth of standardized English, the idea about there is a correct English, and we have conversations around the reality of that and the fact that it is a myth that there is one single correct English at the same time that the fact that a lot of systems of power in our society operate through that myth, what does that mean for you if you are coming in from a different linguistic background? And so we have those conversations that I hope help them think about challenging that myth at the same time that we are acknowledging that the myth exists and that it's a powerful force that we as a society can and should be pushing back against. I think about ethnography. Yeah, I've done that a lot in my basic writing classes is I've done an assignment where I have them interview each other and then reflect on their literacy and reading practices. And so they get an opportunity to do that auto-ethnography and dig deep into their own history and practices and the sort of thing that you do with the literacy narrative where you think about the moments, the people that shaped you as a reader or writer. But I think this assignment helped them think about... So I'm looking at somebody else and their experiences and relating that to myself and mine, and then we're also reading other people in the class and what they've learned about their partners and so on. And so you get this broader sense of what the community of learners in our classroom looks like in terms of language and literacy. So that's the way that I've tentatively approached including ethnography in my classes or ethnography-like things, I would like to do more of it. That's something that I'm really interested in figuring out, how to build an assignment for a first year writing or a basic writing context that would really dig into that methodology as a way of learning about these things.

SW: How did students at UC Davis or now, your students at UNLV, take up and respond to these conversations about the myth of standardized English?

SW: I think a lot of the practical take-up happens during peer review because I do frame it often around peer review where I'm like, "It's not that I don't want you to comment on each other's word structure, sentence structure or whatever else. It's not that you can't comment on those things." And when I was working at UC, Davis, and we had a huge population of international students who were learning English on the fly, really. Academic English on the fly, and I noticed that the habit of a lot of my domestic English-speaking students was to pick on the grammar and things during peer review. So I've often centered it in that context and thinking about how can we help each other in these moments and thinking about clarity of sentences or helping a reader understand what you're trying to say. But do it in a way that's not reinforcing the idea that you have to do this because it's correct or it's the right way to do it. So we have conversations around the myth of correct English, even as, like I said, we're talking about the practical reality that there are issues of clarity and so on, but also expectations of readers that you're going to encounter in the future where that is their paradigm of how they think about writing. So how do you challenge it and think through maybe a community mindset at the same time that you're acknowledging that it exists, is where I approach that.

SW: Stacy, your teaching and research also focused on writing assessment. What led you to writing assessment and do you mind talking about classroom writing assessment practices?

SW: I have to shout out to my good friend Dr. Ti Macklin, who is a lecturer at Boise State right now, and she leads their first-year writing program. She was a PhD student at Washington State University when I was a master's student, and then eventually I stayed on as an instructor there for three years before going on for my PhD. And Ti was looking at oral feedback, audio feedback to students. She was doing a big study of comparing, I believe, written feedback practices to audio feedback practices and students' experiences with those and faculty experiences with those. And I was so very fascinated by this. And I had started doing audio feedback in response because I was interested in what that could do for me and what it could do for my students. So I think that my interest in writing assessment started with Ti as a wonderful mentor to me. But I think what made me continue to be interested in it is I was dissatisfied a lot with what I felt like was the disconnect between my own assessment practices and the learning that I wanted my students to be making in the class. And I just didn't feel like the practices that I had were helping with that, the feedback was, it felt like the students were getting stuff out of the feedback, but then the grade was something else. And it just felt like there was this disconnect between those two systems. And ultimately, we all work in mostly institutions that operate through a graded framework. So I was trying to figure out how do I explore different ways of approaching assessment that will allow me to emphasize as much as possible the learning that I think can happen through dialogic feedback between myself and students.

Like me giving them feedback, them reflecting on it, asking me questions, us having a conversation about it, and ultimately the grade at the end of the semester. So in terms of how I approach writing assessment, it is really through that feedback mentality that the feedback is the most important part of the assessment. And I've tried so many different types of response, and I'm back to written response now, but it's just honing my own ability to give feedback, practicing it in different ways, thinking about how I can provide community minded feedback. And I set up often with my students, what I call, a community feedback agreement, which is that it's basically an agreement on attempting to the extent that we can to offer as helpful a feedback as possible to each other and acknowledging that they are still learning what that means, but that I am also held to that so that I'm focusing on the kinds of feedback that we agree as a class are the ones that we're aiming for.

And we do a big chart on the board where they write down the kinds of feedback that they've found helpful versus the kinds that they don't find helpful. So I find that really generative, and then I keep that in a Google doc that our class has as an artifact. And then when I'm giving feedback, I'll point to specific things on that guideline. So I think that my writing assessment in the classroom is really feedback focused. I do mostly do labor-based grading, so it's like, you did it or you didn't, kind of thing. They don't do labor logs or things like that. But that's the way that I've tried as much as possible to still meet the needs of the institution, have a grade at the end, but focus as much as possible on feedback. And then I think the final thing I'll say on it is that through reading Asao Inoue's work and my own dissertation, which did draw on a lot of the research and theory related to thinking about assessment as an ecology, I have really taken that to heart in my own course design and thinking about it as a teacher that I do think about how do I design assignments with the assessment in mind and how do I think about the assessment with the goal of how I want them? What I want them to learn at the end, and what this is meant to do or how it relates to the next assignment. I think all of those things are part of one big ecology,

part of one big system, and that if we are thinking about them as separate, that they will be separate for students as well, which is to me, it's not going to aid in the learning. So maybe that's something I've taken from learning sciences. Maybe it's something I learned from my own research, but that's what I've tried as much as possible to focus on as a teacher.

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