

Episode 3: Stephanie Vie

Transcript

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

In this episode, Stephanie Vie joins us. She's a wonderful teacher and scholar and someone I really admire. I feel like she's the quintessential mentor, frequently collaborating and co-authoring publications and projects with graduate students. She also was one of the first to circulate my original post about the possibility of this podcast, Pedagogue. One of the first to visit the site. One of the first to fill out the contributor's form. So, I'm thankful for Stephanie, Really thankful for Stephanie and people like Stephanie. I'm thankful for how she's inspired me by telling others about the podcast, for being excited about it. When people say they've listened, or when they share, post or tweet, that means a lot to me. A whole lot.

Stephanie's interests include social media, video and computer games, and multimodal composition and pedagogy. She is the department chair of the Department of Writing and Rhetoric (DWR) at the University of Central Florida. She is the recipient of multiple awards for excellence in technology-rich teaching, research, and service.

In this episode, we talk about social media assignments in the writing classroom, students' responses to those assignments, and how Stephanie is mentoring teachers and working closely with program directors and supporting writing initiatives within her department.

Stephanie, thank you so much for joining us.

SW: Let's start by talking about social media, like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and the role social media plays in your classroom when you're teaching. Do you mind sharing what that looks like? How social media is a part of your class? And what it means to incorporate social media into an assignment, or to build a social media writing assignment?

SV: So to me I think there are two different directions I can take and that many other faculty members will take when they're thinking about social media and teaching. And so one direction is "I'm going to use social media as a product for analysis. I'm going to have my students analyze somebody else's LinkedIn profile to figure out what I do with LinkedIn, how do I use this weird technology?" Or there's the "I'm a writing teacher. I want you to actually go compose using social media. So I want you to go tweet. I want you to go compose an Instagram post." And I use both of those and I use them interchangeably depending on what class I'm teaching. So I'll focus especially on something I've used a lot in my teaching and has been really successful but has also presented some challenges – and that is using Twitter in my classes to help build community. Because that's a big thing to me. I want my students to feel like they are a part of a community of writers both within the classroom and also to feel like they are a part of a larger community of writers. And this especially plays out with my graduate classes, but it's for my undergraduate and graduate students both. So what I do is ask my students to create, if they

don't already have one, a Twitter account, and to actively engage with each other, and more importantly, with professional associations and with the authors of their readings. And this has been really, really fun. And it has also presented some challenges. So I've realized that as I've done more and more with social media in my teaching that when you incorporate it you're opening up avenues for really wonderful, magical things to happen, and you're opening up these possibilities for ethical challenges that you need to carefully think through ahead of time the what ifs but also just be open to sometimes things are going to come and you are going to have to decide what do I do now? There's many benefits to having individuals engage with these kind of composing tools.

SW: Stephanie, you talk about having students analyze LinkedIn profiles or use Twitter in your classroom for writing purposes, to help build a collaborative community. I'm curious as to how students are responding to those tasks and those assignments, or the use of social media in your writing classroom. I know you've been working on coding with a graduate student on social media assignments. And you've been conducting research on those assignments inside and outside the first-year writing classroom. What are you all finding about student responses or their reactions to those assignments? And how might those discoveries help change the way we see and teach writing?

SV: So one of the things I've seen in my own teaching is that the majority of students are very open and are positive to the use of social media when if pedagogically appropriate, but that there is a small contingent of students who will have concerns, who don't want to put themselves out there and I want to honor that. Because of course I do research around privacy policies, around terms of service. I'm a very careful person in thinking about my own engagement in social media spaces, so I never want to have students doing anything, using technologies that makes them feel uncomfortable from a privacy or an engagement kind of standpoint. So that means I need to do some additional work at the beginning of a semester to consider alternatives, different assignments if a student says you know what, I don't feel comfortable creating a social media account, now what? I think, for me at least, and this is going to be for every instructor to kind of think through what are your boundaries and what is your comfort level – I don't want to insist and say, you know what, too bad, you're in this class and this is what you're going to do, if you don't like it, drop the class.

I would rather try to think about what was my learning goal, what were my outcomes for this, what did I want the student to try to do, is there an alternative way that they could try to meet those goals that asks them to use a different social media tool, a different technological tool altogether. So that does mean that there is some additional learning that needs to happen in terms of scaffolding, but that to me, aligns with things kind of along the lines of universal design and learning, that I'm going to try to make this class accessible to everybody, no matter whether they're going to be having some privacy concerns, or having engagement concerns, or whether they're pro social media. But again, it's a minority of students I would say because many of them have grown up in a pretty technologically saturated world, they've grown up with social media as being a commonplace, ubiquitous technology.

And so the questions aren't so much why are we using this, and do I have to use this, it's more like, okay, so what's the purpose of us using this, what am I going to get out of it, what are the learning goals, which I think is great – when students are going down that road. From the studies I've done, we've found that the majority of students find that social media use has some kind of positive correlation to their writing. So in other words, when I look at some of the responses, and we've talked with about 88 to 89 different students about the effects of social media use on their writing, a little less than half of them – 47% said I think it has a positive effect, only 2% of them said that I think using social media in my writing classes has some kind of negative effect on my writing. The interesting category I think is that 24% of them are unsure, and when I look at the kind of responses about why are you unsure, it points to a potential area for growth in social media with a pedagogical focus, and that is, if you are not making a connection for the students, and if you're not scaffolding it throughout the semester to make it, or the quarter, if you're in a quarter system, if you're not making it clear to them what is the purpose and what has this have to do with writing and rhetoric, then it's going to seem like it's just an add on.

People in our field, Cindy Selfe especially, have been talking about you're not going to throw technology in as an add on, it needs to be something that's really thoughtfully incorporated from the get-go, and students are savvy to that, and what bothers them the most, at least from the responses to the survey and the follow-up interviews I've done with undergraduate students and graduate students across the nation, they hate when they have to teach their teachers about technology. So those are some really interesting elements from both my own teaching and from this study. Students want us to scaffold our classes really effectively.

SW: As you just mentioned earlier, there are a lot of advantages to incorporating technology in the classroom in terms of developing essential learning skills. But we have to do that carefully and intentionally, as you said earlier. We have responsibilities as teachers – we have to think about how we're scaffolding our classes with the use of technology. You know, engaging with video games, computer games, social media, and other emerging technologies, they can really benefit teachers and students, and the interactions students and teachers have inside and outside the classroom. But then there's the issue of privacy and surveillance. And we can't neglect that. I'm thinking about your co-authored piece in Kairos in 2016 on games and surveillance. In my own writing classroom, I talk about ethics and technology every semester. So one in class activity that we do is I have students look at their phones to see how many apps they have, how many accounts, online identities, email addresses, streaming services, social media platforms, games. You know, we're talking about 20, 30, sometimes 60 apps on one device. And then as a class we have conversations. Almost every app has terms of service we have to "Accept," something that allows companies to access data and information. That small in-class activity leads to some really good conversations about technology, ethics, and privacy. I'm hoping maybe you could talk about our responsibilities as teachers in embracing emerging technologies in our classrooms, and using them, but doing so responsibly and ethically?

SV: There's a couple of different approaches that people tend to take. One is, "I'm not going to use these in my teaching because it takes a lot of time and there's a lot of concerns and there's a lot of challenges so I'm not going to use them." And I don't think that confronts the reality of 21st century literacies and the world we live in where it doesn't matter if you are a student or a teacher, like we are using these technologies to compose and to communicate. So, to sort of push it aside and ignore it because they are a problem seems itself problematic to me. Then, there's the other side which says, "I'm going to use these things, it's all going to be great, it's all going to be wonderful, my students are going to benefit," that doesn't think critically about the possible challenges and it doesn't think about the what-ifs that we were talking about earlier. This is also problematic because that's assuming that none of these challenges about privacy, surveillance, data mining, who has access to my data and where is it being shared, that those just don't exist and that technology in a class will just always be positive.

So one of the kind of narrative threads that has always run through my research that I harp on continually because it is so important is this kind of critical approach to technology. And if you are going to compose with and incorporate technology in your classroom, or into your life, I think it behooves you to be really critical about that. What am I gaining? What am I giving up? What are some of the possibilities? What are some of the perils?

So what should we do as teachers? I think that we have a responsibility to think about any technology we're going to incorporate in the classroom and think about what we need to do to incorporate this effectively, responsibly, what kind of conversations do we have to have with students ahead of time. So maybe that means we're having some big picture conversations rather than just skills-based conversations. You know, there's the "here's how you use this tool, here's how we're going to use it in this class." But also, we may need to have some conversations about privacy, about data mining. In one class where we were using social media, we even had some real uncomfortable conversations, but generative conversations about what happens with your social media accounts after you die. You know, that's not something a lot of us want to confront or think about, but it's something more and more necessary these days. If I asked you to create a blog, or create a Wiki, or create webpage, you know, am I contributing to the mess that is abandoned web spaces online. Am I asking students to create something that's not going to have a life outside of the semester or this quarter that's just going to be out there cluttering it up, but it's part of your digital identity, it's part of your digital footprint? So what activities am I asking my students to do that contributes to their digital footprint that's very hard to erase once established? I think we need to be thinking about that.

SW: I mentioned how you've been working with a graduate student. And you do that a lot. You collaborate and co-author with graduate students which is something I really look up to. I feel like the publication process and really understanding what it takes to collect data, to write, to theorize, to publish, to contribute to the field is a really daunting task. It's intimidating. I felt that way as a graduate student. I still feel that way a year removed from graduate school. At times, what it takes to publish feels unknown, and perhaps unknowable. So, I was hoping maybe you could talk about how you seek out opportunities to work with grad students, and how you mentor them? What do you say, what do you tell them, what advice do you give about research and writing?

SV: I think so much of academia and the work we do as academics is cloaked in mystery, and I hate that. Because what it does is it disadvantages those who aren't, you know, to the manor born, like, if you don't know it, then I guess you're going to pick it up somewhere, or someone is going to teach you. Being an effective mentor is so important and I try to give back to my community by being a good mentor. And this is one of the things I love about my work, I love working with students, I love working with graduate students and junior faculty especially, because my travels through academia, I'm a first-generation student and so a lot of what I had to learn, I had to learn by looking at other people's models, learning to ask questions, and a lot of the things I had to learn the hard way I just don't want other people to have to suffer through that if they don't have to.

So to me, I find myself trying to play a really proactive role with the students I work with, especially the graduate students I work with, and I invite them in as much as possible based on their interests and expertise. So, if I know they're interested in trying to become academics, I'm going to involve them in the publication process. I always have projects we can collaborate on, they can help with coding, and they can help with the publication process, and through that, demystify some of those things, because until you've done it you just don't know what it is you're supposed to be doing.

I just try to be really clear those I work with how that working relationship is going to be, who is going to get credit. You know, I'm at a stage in my career where I don't need the credit in a particular way and so it's like, "You get first authorship, I'm going to help promote this as much as possible, I'm going to try to help you get conference presentations out of this, if we can get you some of my grant funding, whatever it might be." And to me I guess it goes back, again, to what we were talking about with community. This time spent makes all of us better. This time spent makes our community better because then that's more people that will hopefully pay that kindness forward. I think that the more mystery there is the more that you can allow elitism can happen. You know, "Oh only the right people should know how to do this, if you don't know, I guess you aren't going to hack it as an academic." That's a terrible approach. I want to try to help as many people try to succeed as I can. And especially, I think women should help other women succeed, women and people from underrepresented groups should help people succeed because those are the groups that are going to have the hardest time in academia because there are already so many things working against us, why try to make it harder.

SW: That's really good work. That's worthwhile work. And honestly that should be all our work. I want to continue with the theme of mentoring others. So this is my last question, and this question is tailored toward your administrative role as department chair at the University of Central Florida. I'm hoping this can encourage and inspire those who are administrators, and perhaps, give them ideas, something really tangible they can consider, possibilities to pursue and explore when it comes to fostering writing. What type of initiatives are you doing to promote writing and composition pedagogy among faculty and program directors at UCF?

SV: You keep hearing me use this word and reinforcing this but I'm trying to really intentionally build community. So what we've done to try to build community around writing initiatives and about teaching which, you know, our department is engaged in – at such a heavy level – we care about teaching, we care pedagogy, we care about writing.

We've done several years of successful book clubs. So I'm going to give a couple titles of the books we've read, in case others want them. These have been popular, people have really enjoyed them. We started with *Teaching What You Don't Know*, then last year we did *College of the Overwhelmed: The Campus Mental Health Problem and What to Do About It*, and this year, we do two books a year, we tend to do one a semester, they would like to do *Teaching Unprepared Students* and *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together?* And so we just recently became a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and thinking about issues addressing our local community and addressing students from particular populations, I think faculty members are interested in a book that leads them into conversations like that.

And then, you know, the majority of faculty members in our department are teaching first year composition – ENC 1101 and 1102 – at our campus. You always have students come in and they haven't taken the requisite preparation courses, they just aren't at a level we were expecting. I'm hoping *Teaching Unprepared Students* will offer some of those generative conversations about how we meet them where they are. So the book clubs I think have been really successful. And it's such a simple idea. Buy some books for faculty in the department, set aside some title, but the conversations are really effective and generative.

We've also done a workshop series around our curriculum. We use a writing-about-writing curriculum for our first-year composition. And one of the elements that we have is we have a variety of different textbooks that faculty members can use from in those classes. So we had a series of workshops last semester where we picked one of the books each month and offered a workshop and said come learn about this book this is a book. This is a book you could use in a class. In one case, we actually had the author of the book come out for a presentation about it. They received copies of the book so that they could have something tangible they could take away and this was faculty-led and kind of faculty driven, the faculty were presenting on behalf of the textbook and leading the workshop so it was also something for them to develop their own expertise.

And my favorite, not just because I led it but because I think this book is wonderful and anyone who wants to learn about demystifying the process of writing an academic article should have this book. We did a *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks* book/article writing club. So the book is by Wendy Belcher. It's just now out in a second addition. I try to give it to many of the graduate students with whom I work. But it breaks it down it's like how do you start with an idea or an unfinished draft and take that in 12 weeks to a potentially published manuscript. So we developed a little writing group, people would come in, we would have open time to write, we talked about where we were, where we were going to submit, we brought snacks. I really enjoy the opportunity to try to develop these moments where we can get together as a community, where we can talk about teaching, we can talk about what I'm doing in the classroom, we can talk about writing.

Because there's something different about me sitting in front of a computer and trying to write by myself and me sitting with a group of five to ten other people who are also struggling with writing and saying, yeah, writing sucks but I'm going to do it and so are you. At the end, we're going to have something we can turn in.

SW: Those sound like really great ideas and resources for administrators and teachers. I'm your host, Shane Wood, thank you for listening.