

Episode 66: Stephanie Wade

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

Pedagogue aims to promote diverse voices at various institutions and help foster community and collaboration among teachers of writing. Each episode is a conversation with a teacher (or multiple teachers) about their experiences teaching writing, their work, inspirations, assignments, assessments, successes, and challenges. You can follow us on Twitter [@Pedagogue](#) and Instagram [@pedagoguepodcast](#), and read transcripts of every episode on our site: [pedagoguepodcast.com](#).

In this episode, I talk with Stephanie Wade about ecological approaches to teaching writing, garden writing and food justice, community-engaged work, and opportunities and challenges teaching at a private liberal arts college in Maine.

Stephanie Wade works as Assistant Director of Writing at Bates College, where she supports writing across the curriculum and teaches community-engaged writing classes that center food justice and language rights. Her research uses permaculture and ecological approaches to literacy to illustrate the aesthetic and ethical significance of multiple genres and multiple dialectics in college writing. She serves on the Board of Directors of the Coalition for Community Writing and recently launched Coda, a new section of the Community Literacy Journal devoted to community writing and creative work.

Stephanie, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: How about we get started by you sharing and talking more about your work at Bates College? What are you teaching?

SW: I teach a first year seminar, which is a class of 15 students and it's theme-based. I'm one of two actual writing teachers on campus. Most of the seminars are taught by Writing in the Disciplines faculty. They're all theme based, and the theme I picked was food justice. It makes it very experiential. I have a lab component to my class, so we meet for an hour and 20 minutes, twice a week, doing pretty traditional classroom stuff. And then, for about three hours a week, we go out into the community and we garden with teenagers mostly, in different community and school gardens around Lewiston. And we get to know them.

The teenagers are part of a group called the Fall Gardeners, who in the summer go through a leadership program with a local nonprofit, and then they teach my students about the gardening. They get to form these reciprocal relationships and my students talk to them about college. And all along we're reading texts about food justice, like *Decolonize Your Diet*, which talks about cooking a pot of beans as being a revolutionary act. So, we can talk about food as a form of rhetoric, as well. And then, my students' writing projects grow out of the texts that we read and their relationships with the community.

I moved here to Lewiston from Belfast, Maine, which is about an hour and a half away, just two years ago. I created these relationships when I moved here and it actually felt quite awkward at first, because I was new in this community. And the way I overcame the awkwardness was just by showing up to the community groups' things and getting to know people in a very low key background way and hauling compost. And then eventually, someone in our Center for Community Engaged Learning made a formal introduction. And so then, I was able to start building these relationships with the garden educators.

And then, the way I got into this work, really goes back to a long, long time ago. So, let me just start with, I was studying ecological approaches to literacy and that got me thinking about the parallels between ecological literacy and ecological agriculture. That got me to looking at the parallels between conventional agriculture, like you can picture tractors and monoculture and lots of pesticides and conventional writing instruction and you can picture standardized tests and Turnitin and automatic grade checkers.

So, I started thinking about, "What could we learn from local agriculture to make our writing instruction more ecological?" And that got me to permaculture and all of this...that was problematic because it's mostly White work. And then eventually, I got to a place particularly here in Lewiston, where we have a lot of communities who have come from Somalia and looking at local agriculture more in terms of food justice. That got me to thinking about school gardens and community gardens as actual material places where I could work together with community members to make our writing projects more ecological and anti-racist.

SW: So you focus on ecological approaches to literacies. What research has helped inform your approach to teaching? What are some of the advantages to this kind of pedagogy and what kinds of texts are students producing in your writing classroom?

SW: I started to study ecocomposition and Dobrin and Weisser's work. *Composition and Sustainability*, Derek Owens' work. Kristy Fleckenstein's work. All of that gave me a theoretical frame for thinking about it. And the different elements in terms of practice, have to do with really paying attention to the local context that students are in. Thinking about knowledge itself as dynamic and relational, rather than stable and coming up with writing assignments that really have students looking at the places that they inhabit and asking questions about their relationship to place and their role in place. And then, creating writing projects that have them engage in public-facing writing.

I have them start out by reading a sort of WAC, like, I mean, writing about writing piece by Lessner and Craig that's in *Writing Spaces* about their writing processes. They write about their own processes and they share that in class. And so, the idea is they're building community in class and learning from each other. So I tell them very much that my goal as their teacher is to help them think about who their neighbors are and expand their sense of their neighbors first in the classroom, then outside the classroom to other people in the community and even our plant and animal neighbors.

And then, we talk about different forms of writing and reading and asking questions and communication that can allow us to apprehend our neighbors more fully and develop reciprocal

relationships with our neighbors. So, they do a lot of journaling and informal reflective writing. And they're always jotting down questions about the texts since so then that leads them to like a pretty traditional research paper, but I call it the DIY for design it yourself project. And they come up with their own prompts and they share with each other. So, they're all informing each other about different aspects of food justice. So one group, well, one student wrote about pollinators and experiential education and she did research about that. Another researched art in gardens and social justice.

SW: How is social justice and language rights and anti-racism interconnected with food justice and the work that you're doing in the writing classroom?

SW: I've been thinking about it a while, so that sometimes becomes invisible to me. One of the terms I learned that is helpful that comes from ecology, is this term "zones of tolerance." Those are sort of borders between different ecosystems that have lots of diversity, but when plants and animals travel into those zones, they are also more susceptible to threats. And so, those are incredibly interesting and healthy places because of the biodiversity.

And if we think about like the first-year writing class as this zone, where there's this diversity and we want to help all students make the transition into that zone in a way that encourages health, that's one way. And so, when I think about how biological, ecological diversity relates to anti-racist work, it often comes down to honoring language diversity and honoring the aesthetic, ethical and epistemological connections between what we want to say and how we say it and making sure that the classes that I teach are spaces where students can draw upon all their linguistic diversity to ask questions about things that are important to them in their home communities. And then, later to communicate out to research to various groups in a whole range of different languages.

SW: How does this approach help students as they engage with the local community and local community members? And how do students respond to collaborating with high school students and working in a community garden?

SW: My students are, even though Bates is a small private college in New England, we have embodied diversity and economic diversity. And so, the relationships my students make with the students in the local community are sometimes because of what they have in common and other times are across difference. And so, I will have a more privileged student reflect on their privilege as they're getting to know the educational experiences of students who are here in the Lewiston public schools. I might have a student from a less privileged background who is emboldened by having a mentoring role for one of the students here in the local communities. So, the outcomes of their relationships are quite diverse, too.

I think the students to a degree self-select into this class, but that doesn't mean they all fully read the class description. It's their very first semester. And so, from my standpoint and I might be a little bit blind, but they really just sort of go along with it. Then, in their final reflections at the end, they definitely admit to having been surprised by the class. So maybe they're just too polite to show me how surprised they are in the beginning of the semester, but they overwhelmingly seemed really engaged in the work.

And I think because we're outside and doing stuff together and getting caught in the rain and they are giving me like discarded tomatoes and so I take them home and I make salsa and we eat that together. I think we developed a sense of trust as a class. And so then, that again feeds into the more traditional goals of helping them see that writing itself is messy.

And so, we also use the garden as a source of metaphors about our growth as writers. And we'll look at like the ugly tomatoes that our dining hall refuse to take. I'll ask them, "Does your writing sometimes look like this bowl of ugly tomatoes to you?" And they say, "Yes." And then again, when I come back the next day with the salsa and I'm like, "See, all you have to do is sort of cut your writing up and add a little cilantro and it'll be delicious." That really makes the lessons like stick. And there's all this literature, too, about community gardens as means for disenfranchised communities to gain agency and have some more control over the food available in their communities. And then, we think about that together. And then, we also think about like interventions we can make in terms of writing and developing projects that can further support social justice and food justice too. So, the community garden is a matter for both in terms of like the food production, but also in terms of a site for community action.

SW: Can you talk a little bit more about your research?

SW: In my research, I've come across the phrase, "Garden-based education." So that means, school-based projects or summer camp-based projects that use the garden as a site for any type of education. Oftentimes it happens in relationship to science or nutrition. In studying that, I found that there's very little attention paid to the garden as a place for writing. And so, I've been using this term "garden writing" and "garden-based writing" to try to push out the idea that the school gardens are really important sites for writing as well as science and nutrition. So, I'm developing a digital resource of writing prompts called "The Almanac of Garden Writing" so that eventually I can share this with local schools and community groups, and they can have more ideas about how to integrate writing into the preexisting gardening education curriculum.

SW: Every teacher and every institutional context is different. I'm curious though as to some of the challenges you face as a writing teacher at a private liberal arts college and also what are some of the opportunities and advantages given your institutional context?

SW: I think the opportunities are more significant than the challenges. The sort of teaching that this approach requires is very labor intensive. And so, I have classes of 15 students right now and I can get a small grant from our community engagement office and I'll have a peer educator in class with me and then another peer educator who can support some of the community engaged work. And so, back when I would have 60 students and zero peer educator support, I couldn't imagine navigating the logistics of it. I'm also very lucky because Bates is a very progressive place. I could imagine being in institutions where I would show up at work in my Carhartt's, because I'm going to be gardening all afternoon and people would be very skeptical of me, or I could be in an institution where my students and I would be talking about compost in class and people would be very skeptical of me.

I feel really lucky to be in a progressive institution that is supporting this alternative approach. I'm very mindful of that privilege. I think a lot about how realistic it is to really translate this to institutions that are larger and have more conventional expectations and less support. We have a system of embedded peer tutors for our first-year seminars. And so, they provide support in class and out of class. We think of them as, I think of them as like cultural translators. So, sometimes I feel like one of the adults in Charlie Brown when I talk to my students and all they hear is like, "Wah-ah-ah-ah" and then they can meet with the peer educator who can unpack what I've said in class, if that makes any sense.

So, most of them are sophomores, juniors or seniors. Some of them have taken a class on pedagogy and writing pedagogy and they provide mostly support for writing and speaking, but they also can take students out on tours of campus and provide overall mentorship.

It's something of a takeoff of what they do at Brown, which is a writing fellows program. It's located in our writing program, but we really see the tutors as partners with the faculty. There are similar tutors embedded in about 25% of our mid-level writing classes. Then, there are tutors embedded in the gateway science classes as well. And so, it's really part of the culture of the institution to have a lot of peer mentorship and the peer educators, peer tutors are all trained together to a degree and they develop these community relationships as peer educators, and then they have different specialties. So, some of them are writing support. Some of them are science support. Some of them are speaking. Some of them are learning skills and time management support.

And the same professional team, myself and three others supervisors run the Writing @ Bates, as well as our academic resource commons. There's a lot of overlap in terms of how we approach the work of training student peer educators. Long before I ever got to Bates, they decided that they wanted the faculty across campus to all be engaged in the teaching of writing and the English Department is completely separate and Writing @ Bates is its own program, which is staffed by a director, Dan Sanford, and two assistant directors, myself and Bridget Fullerton. And Dan is a linguist and Bridget and I are the two compositionist on campus. And then we have a student support coordinator, who's part of our team as well.

I suppose a challenge is that there is no department of writing and the number of colleagues I have on campus is pretty small and we're in rural Maine, so it's not like being in Boston where you could collaborate across institutions more. And part of our work is really educating the campus about the field of writing studies. I mean, that's the case in any institution, right? But here it's just like a very small team of us who are pushing out the message that we're not just teaching grammar and proofreading, but there's something else going on too.

SW: This is my last question. Is garden writing growing? Are other folks doing this kind of work in our field and what interventions do you see this work having in rhetoric and composition?

SW: I collaborated with a woman named, Sarah Moon. She does more work on food and has her students write and they write like little short plays about food in their lives. I have a new collaborator named, Jade, who's working with me on a workshop for Cs about garden-based writing. So, there's a couple, there's like a growing movement of people doing this garden-based

writing. Dianna Winslow, who's out on the West Coast, does this work as well. I think as people are more and more mindful of where their food comes from, there's going to be more use of food and gardening as themes for our writing classes. This is going to get sort of serious, but the pressures that have created the problems in our food system, I see as very much the same as the pressures that are creating problems in our education system. And so the solutions are pretty similar.

And then, this will just get back to one of your earlier questions and then I'll stop, but while I'm very mindful of the work that I do being limited to this institution and the resources I have. I think the solution is really trying to change the structure of education so that more faculty have better working conditions, so that they can do the work in ways that are going to suit their local places with more space and time and lighter teaching loads.

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