

Episode 4: Steve Parks

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, I'm happy welcome my friend, Steve Parks. I introduced myself to Steve at a conference as a grad student one year, and sent him an email afterwards just saying, "Thanks for talking to me." Since, we've corresponded back and forth, and he's always taken an interest in my work, what I was doing inside and outside the classroom.

He's taken the time to sit down and grab coffee at conferences to give me feedback on my writing. Here's another example of his generosity: after this interview, Steve asked me how much labor, time, energy I put into each episode, so I told him. I told him the hours and days it takes to edit and transcribe, nothing unusual, and he stopped me. He said, "No, let me help you. Let me acknowledge the work you're doing. The labor you're producing. Let me pay for something." I was taken aback by that.

Steve Parks is an associate professor of English at the University of Virginia. His scholarship has focused on community literacy, partnerships and organizing. He's interested in the ways in which the academy defines and relates to its surrounding communities, exploring what it might mean to draw the resources of the university into alignment with community-defined needs. He's an activist. He's an advocate for others. He's also the editor for the *Studies in Writing and Rhetoric* series.

In this episode, we talk about what led him to teach, his social justice-based approach to teaching, and what building community partnerships looks like.

Steve, thanks for joining us.

SW: I want to start with a broad question. How did you get into teaching and writing? What led you to want to teach?

SP: I was in Pittsburgh, and I went to high school during the period that Reagan was in office and all the steel mills shut down. So, in my early memory are steel workers who became grocery baggers. There was this massive wreckage of working-class communities, and I realized I had to get to college, and I had to get to college to read, because I couldn't get a job in the other people had gotten them. My dad was a Vietnam war vet and that had taught me I didn't want to go into the military.

So I went to college. I was the first person in my family to graduate college, stay in college. I didn't do very well, it took me a long time to figure it all out. So, I said, "Well, I'll get a master's degree and then I'll go to a law school." I didn't even know what type of law I was going to do.

I was at Pitt, I was getting my master's degree, and I met my wife, Lori Shorr, and she wanted to be a professor. I'm like, "Okay, I'll be a professor, then, because I just want to be with you, and

this all makes sense to me,” so I kind of stayed in the academy because of Lori. But one of the things that I had noticed throughout my whole education and through the master's degree is that all of the skills I was learning didn't do anything for the community that I had come from. It didn't do anything for the people who were trying to figure out how to survive this wreckage of working-class communities.

I also thought that the way in which the communities were being described made them sound like there was nothing but deficits, that it was just wreckage. My memory is of people helping me figure things out, to stay in school, helping me with jobs. There was a whole communal feel to why I graduated that I didn't see represented in my master's program.

So, when I went and stayed for the doctorate, I was even more confused on how our university set within the midst of economic crisis, could go super elitist. I got into Pitt's program the year before [Gayatri] Spivak came, so it was, I think, 18 applications and got in as number 19 or something. I don't know. Spivak came and they got 1000 applications, so I never would have gotten into Pitt if Spivak had been the year I applied.

I got there, and I was stunned by how there was no relationship between what was going on in the community and the university. I was also very poor. I had two kids, no money, it was rough. I didn't think I would finish. You'll see this is tying back. So, I didn't think I would finish, so I picked a dissertation topic that would teach me the skills to survive outside the academy. I studied academic activist organizations to learn how to run an organization, so that when I left, I could get a job doing something.

I came to the writing classroom sort of depressed about its possibilities, and I came to the academy offended by its abandonment of the communities in which it sat. I think, in my opening years of teaching, I didn't understand what the value of this classroom was. I was so poor and had kids, I was working three other jobs. It took me a long time to figure out what the value could be, until I began to think about, although the university was elitist, in the graduate program, the students were still working class. I began to think, well, the skills I'm learning in my dissertation could be useful to these students.

I began to think about the writing classroom as a place where you validated students' literacy and their identity, and you talked about writing not just as something that helps you get published in an article, but that those skills and the network of skills that support them can help the community in which you're coming from.

It was then that I began to think, “Okay, this could be a life for me. I understand the kids in these classrooms, I understand their communities, and I understand what it means to be taught skills that you see no purpose for,” and to try to explain that. So I kind of felt very at home in a basic writing classroom at, at Pitt, it was general writing. I would say that the academy has always disappointed me, but I've always been intrigued by what it could do for people on the wrong side of privilege, and lets you try to think about how to do a better job of that. That's kind of like my narrative, into teaching at least.

SW: I love asking this question and hearing these stories about how people got into teaching, because I feel like it's never smooth. There's always these turns. In your case, it seems like you were really trying to figure out, "What's my role in all of this? Why am I here?" This hesitancy, and also trying to come to terms with how you identify or relate to this type of institutionalization, this place that's very different than your working-class background. I feel like that experience is special because it makes you think critically about the university, right? Because it makes you challenge injustices, statuses and positions that are maintaining those injustices.

SP: I've always said this. I have a very vexed relationship to composition and the academy, but when I talk to other working class folks, or I talk to people who have been marginalized for gender, race, ethnicity, the thousands of marginalizations that the academy enacts, there's always this sense of not belonging or not quite fitting in. When you bring that into the classroom, students can really identify with that, and if you can be honest about that with your colleagues, you begin to find coalitions that feel that way. That you can begin to enact change in your department.

I think the academy teaches you your marginalization is your fault, and your feeling of marginalization is your fault when, in fact, it's a systemic, violent act done on people who don't fit the norm. I think classrooms should avoid that tendency, and those of us who feel that way should feel authorized to talk about that, organize against that, and not just let it continue. We do have agency in this. The we of us who are fortunate to have tenure, to have some publications, if it is unjust, it is because we are allowing it to be unjust. We're allowing it to be unjust because it reduces our teaching loads and gives us status, while other teachers are teaching 4-4-4 with no benefits. We should recognize we have agency in the classroom and without.

I'm just offended when people act as if their status is unproblematic, because their status is based upon the oppression of others, I think.

SW: Steve, you're bringing up great points, and there's a lot to unpack there. You're talking about how some teachers can use their position to potentially enact program, and even institutional change. You're also talking about the problematic nature of academia, the social hierarchies that exist, positions of power, and really the oppression and the exploitation of others. In the midst of all this, there you are in the classroom, teaching students, and there we are in the classroom. I'm thinking about how the classroom space becomes a space for change. Can you share how you embrace this type of social justice-based framework or approach to teaching? Can you talk about the conversations you have with students that allow you explore the problematic nature of institutions? And maybe, for those interested in incorporating this type of approach, what are some practical strategies that allow you to do this type of work?

SP: It differs on the place I'm teaching, but I think that, at this moment, right now, what excites me about the classroom is that it can be a place to have those difficult conversations that the public sphere won't let you have. I think it's a place to validate the concerns of this generation around economic mobility, around the purpose of literacy, around what identity means, around what coalition means. I think, particularly in a first-year writing classroom, when it's their first

introduction to the university, it can really create a marker of what's possible for you to do in the academy, and what you should expect of all your other classes.

I think a place that allows for open, complicated, difficult dialogues about the public sphere in literacy, is a very important space. For me, personally, to link that space, then, to the struggles and resources of the community around the university begins to show students they don't have to leave behind their community, their values, and those skills they learned from their community. But they be linked together and make actual material difference in people's lives. I think if students can get that sense early on, they can place pressure on the university, through the demands of what they expect, to change the way the university operates.

I'm not one of those who thinks, "We teach two million students a year, we can change the world," I think that's naïve about people's labor conditions, but I think a program that emphasizes that locally, in their institution, can put pressure on the succeeding classes, in a way. They can demand more of a teaching culture than, "I'm going to teach you how to write for an academic journal only 300 people are going to read."

I would say the other thing that really excites me is that I truly believe that this generation of students has a deep and profound commitment to democracy, democratizing identity, and democratizing equality, and I'm excited to see that consciousness emerge and grow. I always, the first day when they walk into the classroom, I say, "Okay. One of the things the academy does is it teaches you that, when you walk through a classroom door you, you leave everything you know about life and your experience behind, and you are supposed to limit your imagination to learning what I'm about to tell you. That's a very disenfranchising move. It's both insulting to your communities and your experience, and it also ensures that academic knowledge will never be tested by material reality."

So, when I teach, I'm always asking students, "Well, what do you think about that point? How would your community respond to that point? Do you see this as having relevance for you? How or how not? How do you understand the language they're using? Why do you think they're talking in this way? Is that how you talk in your community?" I try, in those weeks, to create a real space where we can question the enterprise of what we're about to learn. In the process, I do this thing I learned from Ira Shor, I end class early for the first, I don't know, month or so. I have students stay behind, and I say to them, "How's class going for you? Whatever issue you have with the class, everyone is having with the class, and you can't offend me. I want to fix this."

What that does is, early in the class, it says, "Well, the debate is democratic, dialogic and questioning, and the structure of our class can also be a site of dialogue and debate because he's ending every class and asking us how it could be better." In those opening weeks, I try to model what an inclusive, democratic atmosphere would be. Around who can speak, when can they speak, how can they speak, and what agency do they have in creating spaces to speak.

That sometimes takes longer in some places than others because students, I don't think, are taught to think that way about classrooms. Once that ethos is in place, what we begin to say is, "Well, how is what we're learning related to the outside world?" That's usually at the point where either I ask students to think about how they could work on things on campus, with their own

communities. Or, if I have some project going on in another place, I begin to integrate them into that project.

SW: I find this approach to teaching really important and really necessary. Before I ask you a question about community projects and partnerships, I want to ask this question: as you were talking about creating inclusive spaces, for example, ending class early, for students to talk about the class, to share, and to let their voices be heard, I think that in an idealistic situation all of those voices are heard, and everyone feels comfortable enough to talk and share. But that's not the case, that's not reality, and really the marginalized voice, they're still trying to figure out, "Okay. Am I really allowed to share? Am I really allowed to say what I'm thinking, how I'm feeling? Can I critique this teacher? Can I critique this material?", because they've always been marginalized. I'd like to, maybe, talk about that situation more. How our approach to the classroom, even in those inclusive spaces, can really support our students whose voice isn't always heard. Does that make sense?

SP: I'm aware that, now that I'm older, and I've got gray hair, I come in as professor and stuff, that my identity can really squash out people thinking they have the right to talk. That my offhand comments are only amplified by a whole history of amplification of old, white male professors.

Part of what I do when I teach is I endless highlight things I don't do well. Like, "Oh, I'm confused." I kind of highlight that I'm not a threatening figure, that I don't pretend to have the answers. I talk a lot about my children to highlight that I'm old. I try to show that I'm in a slightly different reality from them, and that I want to learn about their reality.

Part of this is my own positioning in class. I also call on students a lot, and I tell them that I'm always going to repeat back what they said and support it. That they don't have to worry about being knocked back in class, and that helps a lot of students.

I do a lot of community organizing stuff, and one of the exercises is the story of self. The challenge of the story of self, when you're in a basement with community groups, is you say, "You could've been anywhere but you chose to be here. What led you to this room today?" I ask students that question early in their class, like, "You could have gone to other universities, you could have taken other sections, what brought you here?" So, they kind of narrativize their journey that brought them here, which gives a fuller sense of who they are as a person because then they tell it to class. That creates a sense of "we're all humans in the class."

I do that as well. I say we're going to create a covenant of behavior, like I do in a community organizing space. We write down what has made us feel safe and intellectually curious in the class, and what has hurt that. We write that on the board, I pass it out at the beginning of every class for several weeks. We use it as a way to monitor our own conversations.

I shift my identity in class, I do the story of self, we do this covenant, I actively ask them to bring their whole set of life experiences into a classroom, and that usually works. I think part of why it works, too, though, is particularly when I've been at elite institutions, when I have them connect

with a community partner, that community partner acts as a backstop for those most marginalized students.

I know students who have felt very alienated, let's say in a Syracuse classroom, because they're working class and poor. But when I go to a Syracuse neighborhood with them, we do a project, they meet people like their parents and like their neighbors. That gives them a community of support when they're in the class. They can feel the presence of Mother Earth and Gary Bonaparte when they're speaking in class because, the week before, Mother Earth and Gary Bonaparte have said, "You belong there. You should talk. You're speaking what's important to us."

That's, I think, a part of community projects people don't think about, that when you link disenfranchised students in communities where they understand that disenfranchisement, it puts them in a community that enables them to have the strength to continue on in an environment which is often very hostile to them. And very alienating and very dismissive of who they are.

SW: Steve, you talk about community partnerships, the importance and the value in building and establishing those relationships. I was hoping you could talk more about the process, your approach. How do you develop those relationships with local communities and organizations? What are some best practices?

SP: You shouldn't do partnership work where you don't have long-standing partnership beforehand. All the management stuff that you have to do is too hard if you're building the partnership and teaching at the same time. If you're interested in an issue and you're involved, you should spend some time. Maybe if you're into housing rights, go work at the Kensington Welfare Rights Union for a year. Spend some time really knowing the people, understand the organization, what their needs actually are. Because then, when you build your class, you can make sure it fits that actual need.

I think a lot of partnerships become burdensome because they're fulfilling fake needs that nobody cares about, so there's no commitment on either end. I think you should wait, have a longstanding partnership, really learn the need, and then align your class that way. I think programs should have two or three long term partnerships that their students return to throughout their career. You have a partner, you find the need, you develop your class.

I think that the next thing that you have to do is have a meeting with your partner before your class begins, and each of you should give an honest accounting of what your resources and your time are. You should match what you're going to do to the resources you have. If you can only devote 10 hours of your class to this project, and they can only give two or three meetings, then what you do might be a brochure, it might be just an event that people come and talk about an issue, but it'll actually happen. There's an urge to do some huge, massive thing that outstrips your resources. The students are disappointed, the community partner doesn't get what they need, and students get a sense that change can't happen.

I think long term partnership, then the resource accounting. Then when you move into your classroom, very pragmatically, there is an elitism in the university that students are often quick to

adopt because they don't want to fail. They want to succeed in college, so you have to begin your class with readings to disabuse them of the academy being the sole producer of knowledge. It disabuses them of what they think an intellectual is. That may be Gramsci, it may be Raymond Williams' *Cultures is Ordinary*.

Then, I think that the next stage of the class has to be teaching very pragmatic skills like, how do you run a meeting, how do you listen, how do you interview, how do you do these things. Existing partnership resource meeting, disabuse them of academia is the only place, pragmatic skills that students bring into the classroom.

Then, I think two final things would be, I would definitely have the students go off-campus and go to the place where the community lives, because it's arrogant to think they have to come to our shop. I would build in an assessment tool within the class. Like two students, maybe two committee members, meet every three weeks or something, and talk about what's going on, report back. At the end of the class, I would have the students do an assessment on how it went in dialog with the community so that they can see that you have to be accountable, and that you can learn what you could've done better the next time.

The only last thing I would say about this is when you work with a community partner, you should make at least a two-year commitment. Don't say you're going to come for a semester and leave. It teaches your students bad politics, it's unfair to the community, and it's not how change happens. So I think you have to say, "I'm going to be here for two years. This is the type of work we're going to attempt." At the end of two years, you can leave completely ethical, or you can choose to stay, but one-semester projects I don't think are good.

SW: Thanks for those tips, Steve. And thank you for listening to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.