

## Episode 58: Steven J. Corbett

### *Transcript*

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

In this episode, I talk with Steven J. Corbett about teaching at Texas A&M University, Kingsville, peer review and establishing a student-centered writing classroom, and how Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) can better serve their students.

Steven J. Corbett is Director of the University Writing Center and Associate Professor of English at Texas A&M University, Kingsville. He is the author of *Beyond Dichotomy: Synergizing Writing Center and Classroom Pedagogies* (2015), and co-editor (with Michelle LaFrance and Teagan E. Decker) of *Peer Pressure, Peer Power: Theory and Practice in Peer Review and Response for the Writing Classroom* (2014), (with Michelle LaFrance) *Student Peer Review and Response: A Critical Sourcebook* (2018), and (with Jennifer Lin LeMesurier, Teagan E. Decker, and Betsy Cooper) *Writing in and about the Performing and Visual Arts: Creating, Performing, and Teaching* (2019). His articles on writing and rhetoric pedagogy have appeared in a variety of journals, periodicals, and collections.

Steven, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: Do you mind talking about Texas A&M University, Kingsville and how your institutional context shapes your approach to teaching?*

*SJC:* Yeah, this first question about the institutional context, it's a very interesting one. We're down here in South Texas, we're very, very close to Corpus Christi, which is a beach resort town, and we're about a half hour south of that. You know what's really interesting is I had read, or I had listened to one of the podcasts by another teacher scholar down here, Beatrice Mendez Newman, and I had listened to her podcast and I just thought it was very interesting some of the similarities. Now, we're not quite as far South as they are, and you see that, I think, in an interesting way in the student population that we have. So where they're about 90% Hispanic, it's just this enormous Hispanic population, we're more about 70%. Even still, we're the fifth largest Hispanic Serving Institution in the country, so it's very interesting.

So, in a sense, the context here is we're technically actually an R1 university, even though we're a smaller school of about 8,000 students. We have such a heavy agriculture school, such heavy engineering down here, so in that sense, we're a real mix because we are classified as R1, but boy, it's really those agriculture, that engineering that really pulls us through. But one thing I really wanted to get back on, on what Professor Newman was talking about in her podcast, is something that really struck me when I heard her talking about it in terms of our context, in terms of our students and the population that we serve here.

I very much assumed, "Wow, okay, there's going to be a lot of bilingual students. There's going to be a lot of students that are speaking Spanish and maybe struggling with their English because they don't speak it at home and all these kinds of things," but what's really interesting, and it really parallels with what Dr. Newman was saying, is this idea that, no, that's not actually the case here, as similar to the case with her institution.

I mean, I run a writing center with 20 tutors and I technically, right this moment, only have one bilingual tutor. I've got 18 Hispanic tutors, but only one that's actually a bilingual tutor. I think you got to be careful and I think you'll hear this theme running through the things that I talk about, I think we have to be careful in assuming who our students are, what they know, what they do, what their home life is like. I mean, there's just so many variables that go into a person's identity. You can't just look at somebody and really sort of start making assumptions about who they are.

*SW: So I'm interested in hearing more about the kinds of texts or assignments you use in your writing classes and how they complement your larger pedagogical goals or aims and support the multiplicity of identities in your classes.*

SJC: They'll actually do a syllabus analysis. So they're coming at the genre of the syllabus in a way that they've never maybe quite done before. They're going to go in there and they're going to read it, but then they're also going to do a couple of other readings. They're going to read an old Donald Murray piece talking about process. They're going to read a Rachel Toor talking about the habits of writers and just...it's not easy for anybody to write. And then they're, this sounds odd, but then they're also going to research me. They're going to just Google, Steven J. Corbett and writing, and they're going to be like, "Who is this? Who is this person?" Then, they're going to write a little brief paper. And again, I make sure they understand that whatever they write, they get full credit for as long as they do it, they get full credit for it.

I'm up on a portfolio system, guaranteed B system. So I'm doing a lot of stuff early on to try to make them feel comfortable, to try to make them feel like, "Hey, okay, this might not be my typical English course where I've struggled in the past and I wasn't getting a lot of support." So they do that and they find out a lot about me. The first thing we do then is a peer review activity, right? Where if we're in class, we literally, they just pull up their papers, either hard copy or on the screen, and we literally just bounce from chair to chair or from screen to screen if it's virtual, and they read every single paper that everybody else wrote and they don't give any comments.

I talk about this in terms of just reading. You're just reading, you're just listening to each other. But in the meantime, what are you really doing? Oh, you're judging, you're hopefully, hopefully, and all the peer review stuff, you're bringing in strategies, you're absorbing strategies, right? You're listening to what everybody else has to offer. You're looking at their titles, you're looking at their intros, you're looking at all these different things, and you're saying, "Hey, okay. If I didn't do it the first time, if I didn't make the moves that I thought would be great the first time, could I do it in a subsequent draft?" Right?

Then we go into a short assignment where they write about their major. Now the whole course, this freshman composition course, is all about, "Why are you here? What are you interested in majoring in? What do you want to pursue? What do you know about it?" Let's just see if we can't figure some of that out together, right?

They're taught writing a paper about their major, why they're interested in it, why they want to do it, all these kinds of things, what's interesting about it to them, and that's a short assignment. Next thing you know, we get the major assignment and what they do here is by this time they're in their peer groups, nice and solid, they've already had little exercises to get familiar with each other. They're all facing each other in the classroom or doing different things online. They're actually going to exchange the short assignments that they wrote about their majors, they're going to read each other's papers, and then they're going to write a comparative paper about that, about their major and their point of view on it and compare it and contrast it against these other folks. Now, because we're in a portfolio system, they've got the entire term to try to produce the best paper that they can do.

And they're on a guaranteed B at this point, so I'm not even grading them at this point. I'll give them feedback and all these kinds of things, but nothing's being solidified in the grade or anything like that, right? It's performance, perform, perform. Next assignment you get is just a little assignment to kind of take a breather. It's just a little rhetorical situation and genre exercise, and it's kind of fun. And they just go through and they do a little email about a car crash that they had and they got to tell their grandma about it and all this little...fun, little thing. It's just basically to take a break. Because the next thing we do, we're jumping into really the most major paper for the entire course, which is deeper research into the field or the major that they're interested in pursuing.

So everything up to this point has been practiced for, it has been getting them ready, it's been getting comfortable with me, getting comfortable with your peer group members, so that they can really, really try to write the best stuff they've ever written. This assignment, this next major assignment, is scaffolded down into shorter assignments that have them doing sort of some reporting on the major a little bit. They interview somebody in their field. They try to find somebody in their field to interview. Then, they look up a couple of academic articles in their field and they're kind of looking at the way knowledge is kind of produced and the way the rhetoric of those things...because some of the other things we're doing in class is we're going to, again, this is a very peer centered sort of class, right?

So we're looking at undergraduate research journals as some of the primary readings, right? Our school happens to have one. They're reading articles in there from across the disciplines. University of Florida has a really great one and so many different institutions have so many great undergraduate research journals. I, for my course, for our purposes, I think it's important for us to study some of the rhetorical features of those different undergraduate journal articles. So they're

aspiring to write, in some ways, and to sort of incorporate some of those strategies and the things like that as well. And these are very, very basic sort of rhetorical and structural analyses.

The purpose of these articles, the people that they might be writing these for, again, structurally, titles, intros, transitions, the way evidence is used, all those kinds of things running through there. And then of course, since they're doing an e-portfolio, they're doing lots of reflections and reflective writing on their processes and everything that got them to be able to produce these things that they've produced, including a final conclusion...lots and tons and tons of writing, Shane, and then their final conclusion to their digital e-portfolio book and what it took to get there and all the processes and everything...and then they tell me what grade they believe they earned for the course.

*SW: You're talking a lot about peer review and establishing a student-centered class. Effective peer review is such a complex activity. How do you frame peer review in your class?*

SJC: Yeah, I think, it's...Shane, it's sometimes tough now because I've been doing it for so long and it's just become so tacit as far to my knowledge, you know? I write books and do collections and write all these articles and stuff about it. But I think just in terms of how I've sort of internalized it, I really think of it in terms of being very honest with students about it, understand that this is what we're going to be involved here with together...it is a great, great old tradition of learning. Learning to try to trust each other and learning to try to listen to more than just the authority or whoever the main authority figure is in any sort of communication situation. Toward learning to listen to what other people might have to say about things, learning to kind of maybe sort of learn to trust your own voice and your own judgements a little bit more in relation to the fact that you've heard so many of these other voices and these other points of view.

So from beginning to end, and I don't do a lot of hard grading of those peer review performances, I just don't do a lot of that kind of stuff. I think I keep the grading of those kinds of things and the assessment of those kinds of things, much more involved in sort of an overall sense of the participation that they've done in the course. And so I think in terms of trying to build trust with students, trying to be...you know, some groups work better than others, some don't. I'll do what I can do to try to help make up for that a little bit as the instructor.

Send me something, I'll take a look at it, I'll give you a little bit of my point of view on it. I don't know, Shane, flexibility, understanding. I think a lot of these things, they're just basic human traits of kindness and things like that. It's super, super, super important. I love the Framework for Success in Post-Secondary Writing and I make sure and highlight that as a very important thing on my syllabi, because I think that those habits of mind and those kinds of attitudes and dispositions in teaching and learning are just extremely, extremely important.

*SW: Steven, I'm curious as to whether there is any kind of hesitation or resistance from students who might be more comfortable with the teacher responding to their writing? I'm thinking about*

*how peer review might be new to some students or how they might have had negative experiences with peer review.*

SJC: I swear to God, I have performance anxiety, like a lot of people do, every freaking single time I go into a classroom, I'm like, "Is it still going to work? Is it still going to work?" I mean, and I've taught at a few different institutions and especially every single time I've gone to a new institution, right? I was in New England teaching in New Haven. I was down at George Mason University teaching there. Each time I've moved, I had gone like, "Wow. Okay. Is this going to work with this group of students?" Well, I tell you what, it definitely has worked with each group of students. I mean, so for Kingsville and the university I'm at right now, I was worried about that. Is this going to be okay with this group of students?

Are they going to just...because I had heard things like, "Oh, they really...it's yes, sir, no, sir. All this kind of stuff, super, super respectful of authority and things like that." But to be honest, Shane, again, those strategies that I've tried, I think if nothing else, I think that they look at me and they say, "Wow, this guy is earnest about this. He's honest. He cares. And he's a nice guy." And again, from that first assignment, where they do just sort of an ethos, it's an ethos thing. They go in and they say, "Who is this guy? Is this guy qualified to teach me and to be saying all this stuff?" I think right away, they start getting the answers that will make them feel comfortable. And so when you put them through these kinds of activities, there's a certain level of trust that's being maintained and I just do everything I can to try to sustain and to deserve and earn that trust.

*SW: From your understanding and perspective, what does it mean to serve Hispanic students and to design principles and policies that center on equity and truly advocates for students and their identities?*

SJC: I think, especially in my position now as the person who runs the writing center, as the person who was brought in to really design and organize the QEP (Quality Enhancement Plan), which is tied into our accreditation, super, super important. I think I have a big obligation and a big responsibility when I work with faculty on really trying to share why I do what I do, you know? Some of the things that I do, for example, I've got a student right now, Katherine V. Villarreal and she's an amazing, amazing person. She's exemplary in what is going on. She's a student who...she was forbidden to speak Spanish in her household. She considers herself sort of culturally White, but at the same time, she does embrace her Hispanic heritage.

When we go to conferences and things, and she does presentations, she talks about those kinds of things. And we've written things together where she talks about me, very personal sorts of things, where we've got a book chapter coming out together that links feminism to the idea of listening and research and listening to our research subjects. And sometimes if we make mistakes, trying to learn from some of those mistakes that we've made, and who she is with her identity and who I am as a middle-aged White guy, and how we come together to listen to each other and to work together with each other for excellent, amazing, wonderful, fun, cool things.

I think that, so for me, the principles, the policies, really for me and at least just for my job, comes down to sharing what it's taken twenty-three years to really say, "Hey, look. I think the idea of universal is a very, very tricky one, but I've worked with a lot of different populations, and now I'm working in a Hispanic Serving Institution and some of the same principles of being fair, listening, trying to design things that work for the majority of your students. These are just some of the lessons that I've learned, and these are just some of the details of the ways I've come at it."

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