

Episode 151: Tashnia Emery

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

Pedagogue launched in 2019 with the goal of amplifying perspectives and experiences on teaching writing across institutions. For the most part, I feel like the podcast has promoted a wide range of perspectives across post-secondary education contexts. Starting out, my hope was for Pedagogue to be a platform that fills gaps in more traditional alphabetic scholarship, which often privileges teachers situated in more research-intensive universities that have space and time to publish. I wanted the podcast to be a space that embraces and showcases experiences and knowledges from all types of classrooms, for us to consider and think about what teaching writing looks like, what it means to teach writing in different contexts, from two-year colleges to Historically Black Colleges and Universities, to Hispanic-Serving Institutions, to private colleges, to small liberal arts colleges, to large and small public universities.

Through all these episodes, there's still something missing. The voices and perspectives of teachers at Tribal Colleges and Universities. I taught basic writing and first year composition at a Tribal College as an adjunct for almost two years, and those students and classrooms impacted my perception and understanding of teaching more than any other context. There are currently 32 fully accredited Tribal Colleges and Universities in the United States, serving approximately 30,000 full-time and part-time students according to the US Department of Education. This is the second episode in a 10-week series that highlights tribal colleges and universities.

In this episode, Tashina Emery talks about teaching at Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College, being a tribal court associate judge, resilience, art and writing, and what she wished people knew about Tribal Colleges and Universities.

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Clearing of the sky-cloud woman, Misanaquadikwe, in Ojibwa, is her spirit name, The One Who Can Clear a Cloudy Day. Tashina Emery is from the small reservation Keweenaw Bay Indian Community of Michigan. She teaches at her local tribal community college as an adjunct professor. While transitioning into her new role as a KBIC tribal court associate judge, she runs a jewelry business during the evening. She writes into the night after earning her MFA in creative writing, doing it all while being a first-time mother, worrying and caring for her little brown baby and all future brown babies.

Tashina, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You teach at Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College. Can you talk more about your institutional context?

TE: Yes. So we're a very rural reservation in Michigan in the Upper Peninsula. Keweenaw Bay is actually right on Lake Superior, so that is a really beautiful space to already be teaching in. Our homelands are right here. We have such great tangible treaty rights for our people. And speaking of student demographics, we have to have a bigger Native American population for our students. So those are who we are trying to serve and creating future leaders for our community and for our reservation. The student demographics though, are... I mean I ran the liberal studies department from 2021 until just this past June, before my appointment as the new associate judge for our tribe as well. And that liberal studies department, I expanded from having about, I would say, six enrollee members to now about 40 enrolled, I would say even a semester. So it's definitely... I think COVID impacted our small community college in actually a good way. And I think that's a norm for a lot of the tribal community colleges that I have spoken to.

Actually, just got back from a TCU convening, which the American Indian College Fund had put on, because I just did a program review. It's usually you're reporting on exactly the demographic of your students and their mothers, their parents. We're kind of getting more finally, of the first straight from high school students. We now have new programs at our institution where we're doing dual enrollment with our high schools. That is freshly new this year. They're called CTE courses. And then we also have continuing education for their careers. Our tribal center and the primary employment of... The students who are coming in are able to take classes usually with financial aid assistance and support. And also the last one is our elders. So, our elders also get really cool incentives when continuing education. And post COVID all that era, still happening, was teachers were able to take courses as well. So, our adjuncts were given the opportunity to take some classes at TCU. And sometimes it was their first time taking a TCU class.

In my experience, I think probably based on colonization, I was born and raised right here on the rez in Barga, on the Keweenaw Bay Land. But it was always taught to go to those big institutions. And I'm about 30 now, I finally was like, "I'm going to go get a TCU degree." So I went to IAIA. It was a hybrid creative writing masters program and it was probably one of the best experiences, even for myself as an adjunct. And I was teaching at the time too at our community college and running a department. So I'm like, "Oh, they're doing such cool things. I'm going to utilize what they're doing in the classroom." And that really benefited even the way I teach now and my motives in teaching. And it was in creative writing, so that really fueled storytelling in all my classes. So I teach art as well, so I always try to incorporate any type of free writing, creative writing, healing, storytelling. Those all are big things in all my classes.

SW: Can you talk more about your roles and responsibilities being a tribal court associate judge?

TE: So an associate judge is basically, it's part of the judicial branch of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community. The college is another branch of that community, so they're two separate worlds, so I do have to keep them separate. There's always that. And one is serving people, protecting their rights, and hearing cases and preparing for those cases. And it's everything. It's from civil to criminal to family court, everything in between, healing. I've taken over the healing to wellness portion, which is helping our people in recovery, and making sure that we give them their supportive system. They need a lifeline, they need a whole supportive team. So, that's a different approach to the usual jail and punishment that the Western society has ingrained in

what court should look like. So our healing to wellness program is the opposite of that, which is another cool way of how we're using sovereignty.

A lot of what you do on the bench is working to give clarity to protect my people. And being a judge for my people means my community has its own sovereignty in making sure those protections of their rights are being upheld. And I think I can do that because of my educators, because I have already had those opportunities of educating my people and utilizing... Me and my chief judge were just teasing. She's like, "Don't kill them with kindness, but kill them with clarity." And I don't even like the word kill, but I'm like, clarity is what you need. You come in, this is their most traumatized and most vulnerable position in their life that you're being opposite of them on the bench. And I definitely see that being very ultimately fair and unbiased and that approach. And making sure that all parties are being protected in their rights.

I think that I see a lot of beautifulness in that. And I think it blends very well with teaching. I'm able to still be an adjunct and do all the things that I love and serve my people in both capacities. So, that's always the goal.

SW: What guides your approach to teaching writing? And what are some values or ideas you want students to take from your classes?

TE: Yes. So that is such a good question, for sure. Firstly, our mission is to be always culturally sensitive and appropriate for our students. And always recognizing the resilience and the strength that came from oppressive and genocidal systems that we've faced. And then those values stem into our program learning outcomes and our course learning outcomes. So the program learning outcomes are again, what the degree program has to abide by. And then the course learning ones are for each class. So most of the time, or not most, but all the time. There's always a cultural component as one of those outcomes, like, you will be getting this.

And the courses that I usually teach are Anishinaabe, film literature, Anishinaabe literature, Anishinaabe art. And we always start with Anishinaabe because that just means the original people. It means Native art, Native art forms. I teach Native garments, so a lot of the culturally specific teaching. And you can't really go and search on those big large platforms like, "I'm going to find a science book and utilize all that content and build a class and curriculum build from that." So, that's also what makes our really unique at tribal colleges. Because we are building curriculum from our ancestors, from the elders, from community support, from the work that's happening now in our entities and our institutions as tribal nations 'cause we have our own jurisdiction and our own sovereignty that allows us to really tackle our own... be agents of change in a good way.

But let me expand too further about... Also, I'll always like to put in my, because assessments really big and running any kind of class, any kind of department, those kinds of things. So always in my assessment I always plug in there is, I am Native American raised, born and raised right here on the res. My mom runs the enroll, or not runs, but she's worked in the enrollment department for probably 32 years now. So I have that unique... Or I think all Native instructors have, we're innately Native and they're always like, "What cultural things have you provided your class?" And I'm like, "I am always innately being Native and teaching from a Native

perspective." So when they give you that list. But I'm also following the list too, so I'll always have Native instructors come, I'll have Native artists who are doing things now. I'll contact Native authors who are... I've got to work alongside a lot of Native authors in the IAIA program, so I'm utilizing their work or just contemporary, anything they're doing that's valid and appropriate too.

And one of my biggest values though, that I bring into all my classes and that I actually worked my thesis on while getting my creative writing masters, was humor. And I think humor is a big value for especially the Ojibwa people in the Great Lakes region and maybe all of Indian Country. I think we have a special, unique bond of humor where I say when we are using humor, we're usually laughing and simultaneously crying at the same time. And I think that speaks volumes for writing courses and writing for healing as well.

SW: Can you talk more about the importance of resiliency and healing through writing?

TE: And that's actually a really good question too. I went to my institutional memory, and that institutional memory are the faculty who are still doing the beautiful work and amazing work in our tribal colleges. And they've been around and have invested a lot of time into building our courses and whatnot. But I recently just took a Native American history class with one of our great Anishinaabe instructors, which is Denise Keto. And the way she teaches just blew my mind 'cause like, "I'm not going to sign up for a history course that sounds very linear, chronological. I'm probably just going to have to memorize dates and it just sounds like just icky, colonial and weird."

But I get in this class and the first thing we do is we start at creation. We start with those stories. We're starting with prompts, with writing prompts in painting prompts, using the different modes that would inspire creativity. And looking at history as our lifespan as the four circles of life from birth to the other side and reaching elderhood to the spirit world. So I'm like, "This is the cosmology that I wanted." So yeah, it really disrupted my thinking, my form of how I teach too. So, I do think that's one way that tribal colleges are disrupting what even the language sounds like. And I try to intentionally do that all the time too in my teaching.

Someone at the conference I just went to said, "We're a wearer of many hats." I'm like, "I think we're a wearer of many beads." And I'm wearing beads right now. And I'm like, "They're heavy." Those burdens are so many. There's many. But also the flip of that is that when we look at a single seed bead in community with all the other beads, those are the hopes and wishes and prayers of our people now, our future seven generations, the present in the middle of those seven generations too. So, I think there's a lot to say about when you take the language and switch it to be more accommodating for. Because English language is also another very colonized tool. So, I really am very strategic when it comes to how I even word things.

SW: What text and writing assignments do you use in your writing classes?

TE: So even in my modern Native American Literature, when I'm actually going to teach that again this fall, we usually read from the contemporary what people like Louise Eldrich are doing. And some of the works from... What's another one that we read? Brandon Hobson, Tommy

Orange. We read the More popularized, but then we also go back to Silko and just reading every genre too. I also provide them with a sheet of they get to pick one of their own. So maybe kind of looking at one of my favorites is the horror, Stephen Graham Jones, love him. So I give them a list of must reads, if you graduate from a tribal college.

And it's funny 'cause I started that and I'm like, "Yeah, I think this is appropriate. Here's the 10 that you probably need to read if you're going to graduate from a tribal community college. But here's the expanded list of everything that's going on in Indian Country, from inception to now. And who's changed the literary field in general and the OGs." Which I would say Vizenor and those kinds of guys.

So, I give them the opportunity to do their own research, but then when we get into more, after we do the reading, I like to prompt them utilizing some of those themes, those big themes that Native writers are using like humor, how they change the timeline even. The stories aren't originally just beginning, middle, end, it's cyclical. There's a lot of different approaches that they're taking creatively, a lot of lesson learning. A lot of themes with that go back to our original stories with tricksters and those kinds of things. So prompting how they would do that contemporarily using their own experiences, adversities strengths to pull out some other ideas. But using the stories now as guides. So, that's one way I'm doing it in that course. But even in my digital storytelling course where we're actually taking, like you were saying, multimedia and or going beyond media into dance or theater, I like to ask them, or I like to prompt them with free writes in class. Because I want to have them write in community. I think there's something really special. I teach that class online, so I think there's something really special about just creating a space where we're in unison, writing together. I think there's a lot of healing just to be together and writing in community. That's, I think, another approach that I can think about off the top of my head.

SW: What are some challenges to teaching writing at Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College?

TE: Good question 'cause I was going to go there next. That portion, we didn't get to part that's really even more special, is the vulnerability to share afterwards. And I teach my art classes like as artists, we're sharers. And I think there's something that has a connection between art and writing because I think they both come from a fuel, a place of creative working and a lot of healing for sure, in both those practices. But in writing specifically, when you're sharing, there is a lot of vulnerability to that, but also a lot of connections you're making right away. And I am always like, people are very hesitant at first. They're like, "Whoa, we're going to have to share?" I don't say it right away, but then they always do. They always share. I leave it open for them to do so. And just that connection of vocalizing and telling your story orally as something very unique. And especially for Native populations. We're used to telling our stories orally, and that's ingrained in our blood and that kind of thing. So I think that's one of the challenges, is just preparing them to be vulnerable in those spaces. Because usually when you are writing, it always comes from a very emotional kind of field from your experiences place. Even if it's fiction, I do prompts in fiction and I'm like, "Where does fiction blend?"

SW: What do you enjoy the most about teaching writing at your institutional context?

TE: Yeah. I definitely enjoy the exchange that happens. My students for sure, are very amazing, they are humble, and they make me want to write even. Because I did go to school for creative writing, I want to write. And I'm always able to do that through their encouragement and even just as inspiration. They're doing such good things, and I'm constantly looking for places where they can do resin-seers or publishing, and just to build a platform.

And also, it's beautiful to see their world change with a little bit of awareness, because some people are daunted by writing just in general. They're like, "Ooh." Even using the word writer could be a little bit scary. And they're like, "I don't do that." And then they're like, "Oh wait, this is something we have always been doing around the dinner table around grandma.", so, just cute little things. And even my mom, I credit my mom to being my first storyteller, my first encyclopedia, my first those kinds of things.

SW: This is my last question. What do you wish people knew or understood about tribal colleges and universities?

TE: I think too, I've advised non-Natives coming to our institution. And they even in their exit interviews as they're graduating, they're like, "What a beautiful close-knit community that we would not have gotten at a non-Native, western institution." And I think that's something so true, is that because we're smaller and we offer such diverse different perspectives on education just in general. It really is a beautiful way of thinking. And you're kind of unlearning things, but also kind of picking up just a deeper awareness of place, of space, those kinds of things. And that's really important, especially when you're going to become a future leader in the field of your choice. And I think once you do transition, if that's the goal, to go to another four-year institution, because usually tribal colleges are two-year, then I feel like you're very well-equipped. Because we offer capstone. Even that process is very unique for that institution. You're well-prepared when you go into even the career field and those kinds of things.

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