

Episode 153: Todd Van Deslunt

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 fourth episode in a 10-week series that highlights tribal colleges and universities.

In this episode, Todd Van Deslunt talks about teaching at Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe University, students assess, writing assignments on Ojibwe culture, free rights, and what he wished people knew about Tribal Colleges and Universities.

TVD: I think the biggest thing is understanding that we are here a lot of times you get that, "We have a university?" Well, yeah, we do actually. We do a lot of great things. We try to do as much as we can with establishing in the community, especially with our career services and student services, reaching out and having our career fairs and getting people to come in and doing career fairs and resource fairs for our students and connecting them with things in the community and just getting the community to realize that we're here and we're part of them.

Todd Van Deslunt received his BA from Ripon College, currently working on a master's in composition at Liberty University. He works at Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe University in Hayward, Wisconsin, where he is the peer mentor advisor and writing lab coordinator. He's also an adjunct instructor for the English 108 College Writing Research and Reading course for year students, which teaches basic methods of college research and writing and preparation for their chosen fields of study.

Todd, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You teach at Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe University. Can you talk more about your institutional context?

TVD: Sure. Our student body is mostly native and mostly identify as native. Most of them identify as female. We do get in our nursing program a little bit more diverse. We get some students from the Minneapolis St. Paul area that are Somali immigrants from Somalia, and they come over for our nursing program to get a start. We offer two first year writing courses. We do English 108 and English 109. I mostly deal with English 108, which is college writing, reading, and research, and 109 is just advanced, so you just stick an advanced on the front of that and you get the course there. We have one full-time faculty and about two to three adjuncts. It's myself and one of the tribal grant writers actually has her masters in English as well, so she teaches those classes. And then we brought on another adjunct this summer to help fill a couple of positions that we had. It's mostly Ojibwe. We do have a few different tribes in the area. We have a couple of outreach sites. We have our main one here on Lac Courte Oreilles reservation in Hayward. Then up in Red Cliff, we have one which is by Bayfield, which is way on the tip-top of Wisconsin, and we have another one in Bad River. And then we have another outreach site in Lac Du Flambeau. We do a lot of online because we have students that are at those outreach sites, but then they can take the class that's offered at the main campus, so we do the hybrid and online classes a lot.

SW: Todd, what guides your approach to teaching writing? What are some pedagogical values or ideas that you want students to take from your classes and maybe even some texts or assignments that you bring into class?

TVD: My approach to teaching the writing is focused on student success. First and foremost, I want them to be successful in our classes. I want them to come away from my class more confident in their abilities. Oftentimes, and it's not specific to TCUs, but a lot of times college students come in and they're just not... "Oh, I can't write." Whereas if they're given the proper instruction and those types of things and encouragement, they're not going to write the next Pulitzer Prize winning thing, but they can write a coherent report or a coherent essay and be able to formulate ideas and opinions confidently. And the biggest thing, like I said, that I hope that they take away from my class other than confidence is really critical thinking skills being more critical about the sources they use, so I do a lot of annotated bibs and stuff like that to really get them to evaluate.

This source is about your article, but it's coming from a .com, how valuable is that compared to if you would've got it from a .edu or a .org? Usually has a little more credibility to the information that they're getting. In 108, I focus my two major writing assignments on exploration of Ojibwe culture, so their first midterm is a descriptive narrative or descriptive essay, and they talk about their experience with nature.

Is it a spiritual experience or somehow where they made a connection with nature? And then their final paper is we do a Wikipedia style. They do a table of contents and subheadings and all that kind of stuff and put it together, but it has to be something like spearing or treaty rights or something that has to do with their Ojibwe culture. I had a girl this summer as a matter of fact, she's like, "Well, I want to do this, but it sounds goofy." I'm like, "Why does that sound goofy?"

It's part of your culture. It's part of your heritage. If that's something that connected you and your daughter and it's part of tradition, yeah, write about that. Absolutely."

SW: How do students at Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe University respond to these texts and assignments?

TVD: Once they understand that I am not hamstringing them, you know what I mean? I'm not trying to get them into a sphere where this is what you have to write about. I give them some prompts and then give them the leeway to write about whatever their experience is and give validity to the experiences that they've had. I think one of the in-class assignments that works really well is we do 10 minute free writes every class, and sometimes I'll structure it depending on what we're talking about, but a lot of times it'll just be a loose, what did you do? What are you doing this coming up weekend before 4th of July? That was the free write. What are you going to do over 4th of July?

Just write about whatever, 10 minutes. I don't care about structure, we don't care about grammar, any of that stuff. Just write down on the paper whatever you feel you want to write about. And it just helps them to understand the writing process and really figure out how to get over that writer's block and we tie that free write into their narrative essay or their descriptive essay in their paper at the end so that they can have that stepping stone to, "I can't really think of anything. I'm just going to start writing stuff." And then go back through and see if there's anything in that freer that sticks out to you that you could pull out there and use.

SW: What are some challenges to teaching writing at Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe University?

TVD: A couple of different things. Some of the biggest things that I see for students is the Ojibwe culture is big on family, and if something happens in the family, it's very matriarchal, so if something happens in the family that's going to take precedence over whatever else they're doing, that plays into the second one where it's that communication, I think is the biggest thing. Ask for help. Again, that's not exclusive to TCUs. We as humans don't like to ask for help. We don't want to have to ask somebody else to help us out with stuff, but if we don't ask, that answer is always going to be no. If you don't ask me, if you tell me, "Hey, something happened and I need a day or two to get this assignment in." Yeah, not a problem. I understand life happens. Like I said, you got three kids, I got four kids.

We know life's going on, but as long as you communicate to me and do those kinds of things, I do the same thing with my assignments. You hand your assignments in on time. Say you get a 40 out of 50 on your descriptive essay, I'll make my comment, send it back to you, you fix them, and I'll change your grade. You can go from a B to an A. I have no issue with that as long as it's in on time or you communicate to me why you can't, what came up that you weren't able to get that in on time.

I think that's the biggest thing is just that communication, understanding that we're here to help you succeed in your academic career, but I can only do so much. I can only send so many emails. You've got to respond back to me or it's not going to do any good. It's been hard for me to give that leniency just because I'm more of a traditional. I'm almost 50 years old in my undergrad and

doing my master's. I'm the kind of guy that if there's a deadline, I want to get it in on the deadline. I don't want to take those extra. But to understand the differences in the dynamic of what the issues that people are facing now and allowing them that leeway of a day or two if they need to get their assignment in, allowing them that.

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

TVD: I love it when I can see the confidence in my students' faces when they really get a concept or I use this example of the class that I just had. I had somebody that was really overthinking stuff, beating herself up about it, and I'm like, "Now you're overthinking it. This is all I'm looking for." "Oh, well that's nice. Now I'm not as stressed out." And I told the person, "Email me. If you have questions like that, just email me and I'll explain it if I can to ease your tensions, because I don't want this to be stressful. I don't want you to look back on it and be like, "Man, English 108 was horrible class. I can't believe I had to take that and whatever." I want it to be as enjoyable experiences as possibly it can be."

SW: This is my last question. What do you wish people knew or understood more about Tribal Colleges and Universities?

TVD: I think the biggest thing is understanding that we are here. A lot of times you get that, "We have a university?" Well, yeah, we do actually. And we do a lot of great things. We try to do as much as we can with establishing in the community, especially with our career services and student services, reaching out and having our career fairs and getting people to come in and doing career fairs and resource fairs for our students and connecting them with things in the community and just getting the community to realize that we're here and we're part of them and we're trying to train their next generation of workers, so finding out from employers what kind of skills and stuff that they're looking for so that we can make sure that our students have those when they get out. But just understanding that this is a great stepping stone for a lot of people, especially in this community.

We do a lot of scholarships and stuff, and we're fairly inexpensive to go to to start out here your first two years. And then we have partnerships with some bigger universities, public and state universities that will take our credits and transfer right in that they can go to a prestigious or a four-year college if they want to advance or they can stay here. We run all the way up to a master's program. We have two master's programs right now, so they can do their bachelor's and master's all right at home on their own pace.

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