

## **Episode 20: Vershawn Ashanti Young**

Pedagogue podcast

*Transcript*

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

I hope you are doing well, friends. I want to let you know that I'm thinking about you. I'm thinking about you a lot because Pedagogue started with the hopes of being a site and space to foster community among teachers of writing. For us to sit down and listen to one another, talk about our pedagogies and practices, for teachers to chat about their own research and writing, institutions, classrooms and students. I feel like the purpose behind this podcast – to foster community – feels more important than ever, and I hope that this podcast provides a sense of community. I hope this provides rest for 20 or 25 minutes. This feeling where you don't necessarily even feel alone, that you feel a part of something, that you have community. You know this podcast is about your voice, and really, our voices—and our voices matter. Right now, we're doing the best we can and that's always good enough.

I keep thinking about three words, patience, kindness, and graciousness and for whatever reason those words have been really important to me recently and really encouraging. So, wherever you are and wherever you find yourself, I hope those words are equally encouraging to you.

In this episode I talk with someone who has always been incredibly kind to me, Vershawn Ashanti Young. In our brief exchanges over the past year or so, dr. vay has always had this sense of calmness and compassion. He's cool, collected, passionate, and he cares about others.

Vershawn Ashanti Young, who goes by dr. vay is the current Chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the largest academic organization dedicated to the teaching of college, language, literacy and rhetoric. He is a scholar within the disciplines of performance studies, communication, writing, gender and African American studies. He is perhaps best known for a scholarship on the concept of code meshing where he advances that writers and speakers should use their home linguistic backgrounds to communicate, particularly in high stakes communication situations. dr. vay has authored or co-authored nine books. He is currently a professor in the departments of Drama and Speech Communication and English Language and Literature at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada.

In this episode, we talk about pedagogical experimentation and writing as performance, developing cultural and societal justice in the writing classroom, emphasizing self-reflection and ethical good through teaching, and understanding cultural identity and code meshing.

dr. vay, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: You're an interdisciplinary teacher-scholar: art, theater, film, English literature, composition, gender studies, language studies, performance studies. I imagine you integrate all of this into your teaching, so what does your pedagogy look like? If you had to define what you do and who you are as a teacher, what would you say?*

VY: I would say that I'm experimental. That would be probably the number one adjective because I usually don't do the same thing, even in classes that I've taught last year or last term and I'm teaching it again, I usually don't do the same thing. I usually prepare my syllabus based upon inspirations on the topic at the time of the things that I'm currently reading and that are coming out or practices that are new and exciting or the practices that I want the students to learn. For example, if I'm teaching a performance class and I teach an introduction to performance studies class regularly, I'm actually going to be teaching one both in what we call in Canada the spring term, which is May to July and also in the coming fall I'll be teaching the same class. But anyway, this time I've been thinking seriously about what it means to, in performance studies and the kind of performance studies that I do, integrate reading, writing, speaking, listening and visually representing in a performance studies context.

Because I've been thinking about that question, I'm going to design the syllabus around asking the students to engage in a series of readings of largely print text, poetry, children's stories, novels, short stories, et cetera. And I'm going to ask them first to think about how they convey that with their voice to a listening audience. And they have to sort of think about who the audience is. It's not just those students in the class but like who would the audience of this text be and then they have to learn how to deliver their messages and the messages that the text is trying to convey through their voice and then they have to add their bodies, right? Gestures and stuff like that. This is what I'm thinking about now. So I would say to not describe the whole thing and bore you to death. I would say that it is, at the moment, I think the students will best benefit from learning in the current cultural and educational context of the concept if that's not too convoluted.

*SW: You were talking about teaching a performance-based class and I want to connect performance to teaching writing and being experimental through writing. How do you see performance as essential to teaching writing?*

VY: I've been thinking about that question, too. So it's a tough question for me to answer and I say that because I see it differently within different disciplines, but I don't think that those disciplines should be barriers to where students can write differently. Let me explain what I mean. So I see experimental writing going on in the context of say a playwriting classroom or a script analysis class or something like that, or one that's geared towards some kind of performative writing versus what you might be talking about, which is teaching writing in a rhetoric or composition of writing studies classroom and how does performance play there. And I happen to think that we have so many restrictions in our understandings of the kind of performance that can happen in that kind of classroom that I have to address that problem first because I think that script writing, poetry, short stories and all those sorts of things can happen in a first year writing class or one that's just specifically designated as college or even academic writing.

I think that all genres of writing can happen there and be quite creative. And I think that one of the things that teachers could do when they want to ask students to transform those writings into a certain kind of academic or professional or technical context, they could ask them what can you borrow or use from the poem that you wrote or the short story that you wrote or the script, what can you borrow and use here that will be an advantage to the rhetorical context and

purpose. Anything at all? And then that in that way it's experimental, right? Because we might be thinking that the student might take out a dialogue from the script and put it in a technical memo and you might say, "Well that's inappropriate on its face." But if you think about it another way, like a memo in a corporation, interoffice memo or something like that, could have a dialogue and that dialogue could explicate the purpose of meaning of the idea or the point in the memo better than any other way. It doesn't mean it has to constitute the total memo.

But if someone feels like borrowing that from their creative categorically creative work and put it here that it would really be effective then yeah, why preclude it? So that's a long answer, but it's only half the answer. The other half of the answer is experimental writing in a first-year composition classroom, I think should first and foremost ask students to write from their heart. And what I mean by the students should write from their heart. It's the place within themselves that they can access that most inspires them or fuels them or makes them feel comfortable or alive or any of those things. We should be asking them to write from there. And as they use their agency, their authority and their authenticity to write from that place, whatever the genre is in that particularly writing classroom, I think that's where the experiment begins and should fuel them all the way until they turn the project in or disseminate it to whatever audience is going to.

*SW: So I actually wrote that question because I was like, "Can we even separate performance and teaching writing?" like isn't that already problematic to do so? We can't just separate those terms, right? I mean, hearing your response sort of makes me think more about what performance and what performances are we excluding and what performances are we inviting and including in the writing classroom as teachers?*

VY: Right, yep, exactly. I mean, because you said that, how could you separate the two? Writing is a performance and performance is writing. I mean, you can't separate it. It is performance. But I think the difference between what we're talking about is not just the act of performing writing, but performative writing with the intent for it to sort of have a rhetorical performative impact and be constructed in its actual composition, be a performance which we take to mean something that's heightened as a representation to make an impact on us. So yeah, that cannot be separated from what writing is.

*SW: I was really curious as to how you would answer that question and what direction you would take it in. So again, I appreciate you talking that one out with me. I'm going to turn the page just a bit, but still focus on teaching writing, a thread throughout your work is race, language, and social justice. Can you talk about how you frame your classroom around race and social justice?*

VY: I tend to frame my classroom probably less around what most people consider social justice and more around what I hope to develop in my students, which is a sense of cultural and personal, sort of societal justice. And what I mean by that is to say, I ask students to think deeply about what the subject matter is and its personal connection with them, how they can use what they're learning for ethical good in the world and why it's important for them individually to do that. And if they struggle with acting for the ethical good or doing things that take courage in the world, then asking themselves, why? What has been placed in their backgrounds or in their schema and in their life experiences that make them hesitate or feel uncomfortable or things like

that. So I do ask in every class to be quite honest, for the students to take an autoethnographic approach to their understanding and learning and use of the material.

And I do that. I mean that's probably the through line in every class that I teach and I connect that to social justice because students now, I hope to give them at least an opportunity and an invitation to focus on the world as a place that we all share that they have to act for the good on behalf of others, but analyzing themselves if they feel hesitant about doing that, right? If they're an individualist, capitalist focused then why? And is that good or is that unfortunate? And what does it mean if you even want it to have that profile to act on behalf of the greater good in the world to such an extent that it might even mean that you sacrifice something.

I mean not like your life unless I mean the variables are constructed a certain way, but we don't mean that to that extent. I'm talking about just like some people don't even want to be uncomfortable just a little bit for the greater good. So it's less about going out and protesting or creating a petition, although all of those forms are wonderful. It's just those are just not the things that I integrate. I integrate more of a self-reflection and response to the world and problems in our society.

*SW: It almost sounds like what you're integrating through self-reflection in the classroom is more of an ethical approach. I know that social justice and ethics are deeply connected and here I am again pulling pieces apart when I probably shouldn't. But it sounds more like your focus is on self-reflection and cultural ethics through a global perspective?*

VY: Yeah, absolutely. You said that you almost could separate terms as you did in the previous question and in this question you talked about the integration of like race and gender, all those things, language in my class. So let me separate them very quickly for you. In terms of race, so I'm a scholar of African American studies, African American experience, African American life. So a large part of my interests and work lie in focusing on the African American experience in the U.S. And mostly that means African Americans and their interracial relationships with whites. So in my classroom, a multiracial classroom, especially in Canada where there are Whites, there's Blacks, there's Asians, there's Latinx, there are all sorts of people.

So how do I ask them to reflect on race in this instance, African Americans and whites in the U.S. In that sort of setting? I usually pose a problem that's probably in the media, like the issues that generate the Black Lives Matter movement. And I ask them to think about the problem itself and think about the racial understandings of those of the players in the problem. So I don't usually ask students to implicate themselves or to identify personally. It's more about the problem or the issue or performance even that we're thinking about and how we understand the ratio interrelations that impact it.

*SW: This actually transitions well to my next question because what you're talking about self-reflection, cultural awareness and identity, problem posing, and exploring race and social justice extends for you far beyond the classroom. I'm thinking about how you lead workshops that focus on being a minority in a predominantly white setting and what it means to negotiate and lead without giving up cultural identity. Do you mind talking more about those inclusivity and diversity workshops and specifically how you encourage African American teachers and*

*other marginalized populations to embrace their cultural identity in predominantly white spaces?*

VY: So I do trainings and workshops that are geared toward the whole organization to think about its inclusion and diversity efforts and practices. I ask them overall to think about how they're inclusive, how do they enact diversity and how do they do that on a daily basis? Where is it represented in their policies? Where is it represented in the things that they allow and do not allow in their employee handbooks and things like that. And I always ask them if there is any place where you have ever thought, "Oh, we shouldn't maybe have that, but it's good for this reason." Let's look at those. And the places where you show that you not only celebrate differences but you acknowledge that we all have differences and they can be intermixed and meshed in this environment. Where is that explicit and how do you make sure that, that continues?

And then on the side of people of color and minorities that work in these organizations, I often try to get them to understand two things. One, that many of them probably think that they have had to compromise on their cultural practices and sacrifice parts of themselves in order to succeed in those environments, or even to not just succeed but pretty much exist safely. And then I say, yes, that's probably true, but do you have to and do you continue to have to, and if the organization says that it is inclusive and that it accepts and recognizes and celebrates diversity, then you shouldn't feel that way. You shouldn't feel that way, and if you do, what is it that makes you feel that way? And then those are the things that we begin to look at in the organization and to sort of expose why they're making these minorities feel that way.

I'm going to give you one example, then I'll round that up. There's a research article that I teach in my classes. I forget the name of it, but the subjects are African American nurses who are working in a hospital that is predominantly staffed by whites and in their meetings, in the nurse's meetings, these African-American nurses rarely speak. And when they do speak, it's basically to make sure or to support something that's already been said, that may benefit the idea that they had or promote the idea that they had. But that had first been articulated by whites. But outside of the meetings, these women exhibit a highly verbal and well thought out plan of action many times. And the researcher noted how even among themselves and other African Americans that they may speak with how frequently they comment, and she made a contrast with their remarks in the meeting rooms, but even though outside they were talking about the same thing but would not articulate those same ideas in the meeting room.

Then, the researcher asked them why that was the case. They said that they felt that their language, the way that they spoke would be criticized and analyzed more than what they said. So they choose not to speak or allow other people to say the things that they would want to say. And then the researcher asked them, "Did they feel that they were sacrificing anything?" They said "yes." They felt like all of their ideas, or the things that they would say, wouldn't get heard. And also, even the things that they heard other people say that they support it did not always benefit them because they didn't get credit for the ideas and they continued to be seen as individuals without ideas. So, in using something like that, we could see how that example plays out in organizations and how if these people feel that way, some kind of things need to change so that they can truly be included as part of the conversation and part of the organization.

*SW: This is my last question and it's about one of my favorite articles. Absolutely love this article. In "Should Writers Use Their Own English?," you write, "See, don't nobody all the time, nor do they in the same way subscribe to or follow standard modes of expression." In short, you critique standardized notions of English and prescriptive approaches to grammar. You go on to say, "Code meshing benefit everybody." That was written a decade ago, 10 years ago, can you believe that? How do you feel about the progress or lack thereof in rhetoric and composition in inviting code meshing into the writing classroom, critiquing prescriptive approaches to grammar and maybe even resisting standardized English or notions of a standard English, and amplifying African American English in the teaching of writing?*

VY: How do I feel about the progress? I feel that the progress has been tremendous and yet still disappointing, both tremendous and yet still disappointing. But I want to just clarify something before I tell you why I feel like it's been tremendous and yet still disappointing. I don't really argue against standard English as some people might think that I do. I had never have, what I argue against specifically is our attitude about standard English because I don't believe that the current attitude or our current belief about standard English actually matches the technical definition or the linguistic understanding or even the dictionary definition of standard English. There is a mismatch and that's what I have been arguing against. I believe that African American English is already compatible with and apart of standard English. It's impossible for it not to be. I mean there may be some features where there are contradictory rules such as like the use of the verb "be." It's different in standard in what we would think of as standard English or how middle class and upper class whites primarily from the Midwest use that verb and how African Americans used the verb be. Yeah, there is a difference there.

But here's what I think. I think overall the difference is not that great and where there are differences that do exist, they can be integrated together. Not that they lose their distinct characters to such an extent that standard English has a distinct character. I'm not so sure about that, but African American league certainly does, but they don't have to lose their distinct characters, they could be added together too. To enlarge our understanding, that's what I think. And that's the fundamental understanding of where code meshing comes in. It's basically adding our understanding to different ways of speaking, but also recognizing where we actually exaggerate the differences as I think that overall African American English or standard English have been exaggerated to be so drastically different. I just don't see them that way.

And part of the reason why, and there's probably a significant reason why, especially why my first book was so autobiographical because I perceived myself to be an African American English speaker. Certainly, I grew up in that environment. Certainly, that was my first linguistic code that I used. Certainly, I come from that heritage undeniably. But at the same time that I was learning African American English, I was simultaneously steeped in what we call standard English because my mother was a very highly educated person, even though we grew up lower class. School was always very important and that is looked at as the site where standard English prevails. I was always, I mean since I was three years old in school, I had discourse and understandings with my mother growing up, who spoke African-American English and also standard English.

So, as I consider myself, I see them being inextricably linked. Sometimes it's hard for me, even when I was writing my book and trying to think of examples like, "which one were standard and which one is African American?", because to me they have a familiarity that's not as exaggerated as we might believe.

I told you that we've come a tremendous way and yet there's still a way to go. It's a little disappointing. So when I first started talking about this, and of course people have been talking about it much longer than me, I mean Geneva Smitherman and William Labov and Thomas Kochman, and others. I mean, primarily sociolinguists have been talking about this since the time that I started. I entered the conversation around 2004, people were interested, but they had grave reservations, I mean across the board, across class and race, grave reservations. I remember going on a job interview around 2005 for a university assistant professor job. And they were skeptical about code meshing and academic writing. And I was being hired into integrated writing department and they were like, "Yeah, we could see that if you have the students put it in quotes." And the person that was most on my side, most supportive of the idea was the person that could only go so far as having students put everything in quotes, that was what they would consider nonacademic. That was what I faced at about 2005 and 2006, like across the board.

But over the years I have seen people be just as bold as me, even in their expectation, allowance and defense of students using their authentic and home languages and voices in their writing and using that to help them in all types of writing. And even people advocating for this idea are like... have written dissertations on it and are now professors and are spearheading tasks forces that seek to understand and show how various vernaculars and Englishes are already a part of professional and technical writing. I'm thinking about Temptaous Mckoy's dissertation and work.

And also the fact that I'm the chair of Cs. I mean, this is my central idea. This is what people know me for in the field of rhetoric and composition and for them to elect me to our highest office in our organization and to lead it and promote these sorts of ideas about code meshing as well as diversity and inclusion in our organizations shows that we've come a really, really long way. I mean very far, but at the same time it's somewhat disappointing that we even had to travel this road in the first place. And it's disappointing that we still have more of a way to go, that there's so many people in powerful positions in education over educational testing and even some teachers who still believe that they have to wrangle out of students or require that they see their own language as a barrier to communication.

They are forcing them and requiring them to see their language as a barrier to communication and success. And that's a real problem as opposed to seeing it as a resource. So we still have that little ways to go, that's disappointing. But a lot of tremendous progress has been made.