

Episode 158: Whitnee Coy

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

In this episode, Whitney Coy talks about teaching at Oglala Lakota College, Lakota values, culturally sustaining pedagogy, community and kinship, multimodality, craft, and what she wished people knew about Tribal Colleges and Universities.

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Whitney Coy lives in Rapid City, South Dakota with her husband and their family. She works for Black Hills Special Services and has taught full-time or part-time for Oglala Lakota College, a tribal college on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, for nearly a decade. She's finishing her doctrine in education policy organization and leadership with an emphasis in diversity and equity from the University of Illinois. When she's not working, she enjoys binge-watching shows with her husband and doing stick poke tattoos.

Whitney, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You teach at Oglala Lakota College. Can you talk more about your institutional context?

WC: I teach at Oglala Lakota College. It's on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. There's 13 campuses, you could say, spread out throughout the reservation, one in Rapid

City, South Dakota, and then there's a location on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation as well. I currently teach as an adjunct professor at Oglala Lakota College. I used to teach full-time for about six years, and so I was in the English and Communications Department, which is where the majority of our gen ed writing classes fall. Depending on the semester, there's varying sections offered. And so with the campus that's located on multiple different smaller campuses, that's designed so our students can have easier access to education. So within their communities on the reservation, that they can make it to class and not have to travel an hour or two hours even to make it.

So with that, I would say almost every of the major, the larger campuses offer at least between one to three sections of English. Writing comp one and then a writing comp two. If there are two small, or smaller, I guess, campuses, sometimes they will kind of buddy up, and so one will offer English one, one will offer English two, and then they'll transport students back and forth as needed to make it work. Our class sizes typically run smaller, and so I would say at the largest we would have approximately 35 to 36, with the smallest typically being, I think it's six to make the class, with our gen eds needing more to make the class.

The majority of our students are from Oglala Lakota Tribe, and so they are from the area. We do have students that are members of other tribes and things of that nature, and we do have some non-native students, but it is primarily, I would say, upper 90% native students. And I'm trying to think about our number of faculty that we have within our Department of English and Communications, which falls also under with social sciences, they probably have approximately five professors who teach, and then they do have some adjuncts like myself currently.

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

WC: Yeah, of course. So one of the main guiding principles of Oglala Lakota College is the concept of [inaudible 00:05:58], which is kind of the bigger context and the bigger idea of being Lakota and the Lakota values such as respect, honesty, fortitude, just to name a few of the seven values. And so really within that, guiding my class through those principles and ensuring that we are being a culturally sustaining classroom. For years, I think we've heard of culturally responsive and culturally relevant. Culturally sustaining takes it a step further. And so, we're not just responding to the students who are in our classes and who they are, but we're actually really immersing ourselves within the varying cultures, and wanting those to progress throughout all that we do. And so that really guides a lot of our class values, our norms, our expectations, and then at the same time having those high expectations with culturally sustaining teaching practices for our students to have that academic rigor. So no matter where they go, if they move on to graduate studies or doctoral studies, they're able to have that really foundational knowledge of writing.

SW: Whitney, what texts and writing assignments do you use and how do students respond to these texts and assignments?

WC: I would say first and foremost, particularly because our tribal college is so centered on community and that idea of kinship and that we're all related, really growing relationships within

the classroom is important. And not only within the classroom, but also within the community. And the community, the staff members there. We have so many students of ours are related, or have connections with different people within the classroom, within staff members. So it's really important to grow those relationships first and foremost, and come at it as that we're in a partnership together, that I'm not necessarily the expert on this, no matter what my degrees and things of that may be, but we're all here to learn together. So setting that together and really creating that baseline of we're respecting one another in this classroom and that we may have varying opinions, even though on the surface we may all look similar, we're here to grow together.

From there, it's important ... I would say a few things. I would say, like you stated, utilizing text that not only creates a global perspective for our students, so things that they've maybe not read before, but also utilizing texts from writers and scholars who are indigenous, and particularly those who are Lakota, Dakota, or Nakota. And so the Oglala are part of the Lakota, which is part of a bigger band of the [inaudible 00:09:05], which comprises of the nine reservations in South Dakota. So getting writers like [inaudible 00:09:12], Shaw is important for us to really have them analyze what's happening in the past and also what's happening currently.

Oglala Lakota College also has a really wonderful library. It's been awarded congressionally before for the different archives that it has. And so one assignment that I've done in the past, especially for English one, I believe, has been that I have the librarians either bring things to us or we go to the library, which is centered on the main campus near [inaudible 00:09:50] at [inaudible 00:09:50], and what we do there is they will select, go through the archives, they'll look at photos, they will look at bead work, they will look at letters written, these primary sources, and then from there they will pick varying topics. So it may be related on boarding schools, it may be related on traditional bead work. Whatever they want to pick. And from there they will start constructing research on that.

And then another additional part to that is because of the sense of community being so embedded in everything that we do, it's important for us to interview and speak to those within our community and within our families who may have those relations to those items or to those experiences that they are trying to research on. And so there's an interview aspect to the assignment. And with that, I think for many students, they've never had to interview anyone. It kind of pushes them out of their comfort levels, but then it also engages them with people, particularly culture bearers or elders who are experts on what they're writing about. And so the pieces of writing that come from that have been really fantastic because they feel so connected not only to their community and what they're writing about, but also who they are, who members of their community are, and what can move forward. I think as imperative as it is to utilize concepts in terms and themes within narratives and essays and things that students relate to, I think also being able to ground them in a sense of exactly where they are, the place that they are, really allows them to see themselves not only within the work, but also in future goals and future visions of themselves as scholars.

SW: It sounds to me like you emphasize multimodality and craft or crafting, so composing beyond the alphabetic text.

WC: Exactly. 100%. I think if we only did that, I think it would be really flat and I don't think we would get the type of engagement that we want from students, and also the type of encouragement for students. We do have some students that come from varying backgrounds within their education, and so college can be really intimidating at first. And I think that's for any student at any college when you're first taking college classes, and even for straight A high school students, you can come into a college writing class and be overwhelmed because you're learning so many new things, and at the same time, you maybe don't feel as if you fit there or you have that imposter syndrome. And so really trying to craft ways that students can grow as learners, but at the same time be really championed as the scholars that they already are and the scholars that they possibly can be as important in my classroom.

SW: Whitney, what are some challenges to teaching at Oglala Lakota College?

WC: I would say the uncertainty in some of our students' lives is a challenge. And so really trying to not only maintain high rigor and high standards for what we're doing and for the work, and for the scholarly work, but also knowing that students do have lives, and oftentimes those lives can really take over very quickly. And at the end of the day when you're trying to survive in different situations, sometimes homework gets put on the back burner. And so being able to see students exactly for who they are, meet them for who they are is imperative, every single day, and not holding, "Well, that student hasn't been here for two weeks," but instead having the mindset of, "We are so happy you're here. Let's see what we need to do to get you caught up and move you forward, because we really want to see you succeed in our class is the most crucial thing, I believe.

And really being, as a professor, I think really falling back on the staff members who are within those communities all the time and live there and have grown up there and falling back on them and saying, "Hey, we haven't seen this student. What do we need to do? How can we remedy this?" and working through plans together is really important. And so not having that silo mindset, which sometimes happens at larger universities. I think we have challenges that's between transportation, childcare, jobs, and also just life of students who are young, and also students who are older that are going through different situations, whether it be family situations or career situations, something like that. And so it makes getting to class hard and it makes getting to class ... Do I stay with my young baby, or do I go to class? Do I bring my child to class? And so you're trying to balance those things. From the first day that I typically have class, I really try and set up the expectation that I don't know what's happening if you don't let me know, so I can't help you if you don't communicate. And so I have systems of communicating. Students have my cell phone number, they can text me, they can email me, they can also communicate through their college center. And so there's multiple ways that they can get in touch with me. That's important. Particularly if students run out of cell phone minutes, they can depend on the free Wi-Fi at the college center to then maybe email me, or vice versa. Maybe they don't have Wi-Fi, but they have text on their phone so they can text.

And so from there, having that expectation has allowed me, if I start seeing that a student maybe didn't come to class, being able to reach out to them, and not reaching out to them in a one-way communication type of way where I'm just giving them information of, "This is what you've

missed," or something like that, but really engaging with them of, "Hey, I missed you in class today. We did some really awesome things. I think you would've enjoyed it. What can I do to help you get back to class, or what was happening?" And typically, students, at that point, are vocal of saying, "My auntie was in the hospital, so my whole family was there. I didn't think that I could come, or make it." Or, "I got stuck in a different town for work. I don't have transportation." and so then we can work out a plan.

And also, the college center has a really wonderful student management system. Early alerts that you can also utilize to track students, particularly if they're missing assignments, if there was a large scale trauma event in their life. Something of that nature that we can let teachers know amongst each other to say, "Hey, this student has been coming to my class every day. What about yours?" And then if the other teacher says, "No, they actually have not been making it," they're falling behind. Is it because of what they're learning? Is it because their schedule? And so then we can address it from there. I would also say, like I stated earlier, a little bit, really working with the college staff who's in the community. Sometimes they know more information, such as that there's a community death, and what that looks like and who's been affected. And so really trying to take that into consideration of getting plans for students to be able to continue the work and continue the work at a high level, but also working around what's actually happening in their lives.

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

WC: I would say my students, 100%. They are so brilliant, and so wonderful, and they are such leaders, and the ability to tell stories and to weave their stories into what is currently happening and what has happened in the past is such a wonderful skillset. And I think oftentimes we see, on or near reservations, the use of poverty porn to really draw people into these mystified, stereotypical images of indigenous people. And I just know that from the relationships that I've built with students and from the work that they're doing and from who they are, none of that matters or is even consequential in any of the scheme of things. They're so much bigger than that, and I just am so thankful and grateful that I'm able to share learning spaces with them and to see them grow, and to see them graduate and see them go onto their careers, because I have had quite a few years at the college, and so I've been able to see students really work through the whole system, and now they have a job, and now they have this, and see them as leaders in communities, which is amazing.

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

WC: I think just really the idea of breaking down ... Well, first and foremost, breaking down those ideas formed of what indigenous students should look like, and that it is this idea that they all look the same, or their experiences are all the same, and that each tribal college is all the same, because that's not true, when we know that particularly working at tribal colleges, and even within tribal colleges, the varying communities that some serve can be vastly different. So the college center at Oglala is very different than the college center in Wombley, South Dakota, but they all fall under the same branch of Oglala Lakota College. And so, I think really breaking

down those stereotypes of what we think indigenous students should be and who they are is important.

I also think with projects like this of putting tribal colleges and universities really in the spotlight and really in the forefront of what they're doing, because I've worked at other universities before, full-time and part-time, and I've never had the level of engagement and student work consistently like I've had at a tribal college. And I think for many students, education is the way that they are seeing that they can expand themselves and they want that education so badly and they'll do anything for it. And so that fortitude and those traditional values, particularly with my students, so traditional Lakota values, really are the driving factor for the students on who they are and ultimately the people of society that they become.

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