

Episode 95: Will Duffy

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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In this episode, I talk with Will Duffy about inviting students to engage and reflect on writing, constructing assignment prompts, collaboration and authorship, and responding to collaborative writing projects.

Will Duffy is an associate professor and the director of graduate studies in the English department at the University of Memphis, where he teaches courses in writing, rhetoric, and technical communication.

Will, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I was hoping we could start by talking about your approach to teaching. What are some of your pedagogical goals or aims or values when it comes to teaching writing?

WD: Well, thanks, Shane. I'm excited to be talking with you. It's interesting because over the past couple of years, I've started to notice how the more experience I get as an instructor, the more analog, if I could use that term, my teaching gets. It's just become really more streamlined and simple, I think. I can't remember the last time, for example, that I've created an assignment where the prompt was more than a paragraph or a half page. At the same time, though, the amount of writing my students are doing, no matter what the course, has really increased. My students are writing constantly and I'm asking them to think about their writing constantly. But the stakes of that writing I feel like have been really broken down in a lot of ways. So I'm on my second year of going completely gradeless in the classroom, which is just incredible in terms of what it does to students' own agency as writers.

But yeah, again, my approach is not to make it over complicated. I try to create occasions for students to experiment with writing in ways that might be challenging for them, but also in ways that allow them to step back and engage with the decisions that they had to make and what they were going for. Yeah, if all this amounts to an approach, I'd say that in every course I teach my goals are pretty simple. I want students to write a lot, I want them to think about their writing a lot, and to explore and experiment as they build an identity as a writer without any of the pressure that a lot of them have internalized from what I think for most of them has been up to this point a pretty strict and impersonal education as writers.

SW: Will, it sounds like one of your goals is to get students engaged in the writing process and then have them reflect on their writing and thinking. So how do you facilitate or cultivate this emphasis on reflection and encourage students to engage in this deeply reflective practice?

WD: For a lot of the listeners of this podcast, I don't have to unpack these terms, but I've often explained it before in terms of...my primary goal as a compositionist is to get my students to become compositionists, in that essentially as a compositionist, I view that work as someone who is intentionally aware of and observant of and engages with the meta-critical processes that we bring to the task of discourse production or writing. I think that at the end of the day, students are best positioned to develop as writers when they are attuned to the mechanics of their own writing and thinking.

When I say that I want students to become compositionists, I simply mean that if a student can leave one of my classes with a better sense of why, for example, there's value in maybe drawing out the drafting process a little bit longer, or if they have a better sense of why they struggle with certain rhetorical forms, or if they have a better understanding of the anxiety that they bring to the writing process... I tell students if any of that knowledge is present, you have grown as a writer. That's the kind of thinking that, again, is going to promote your continued development in that way.

In terms of methods, I've really embraced, especially in lower division courses, I've really embraced, I use the term "small writing" to encompass what that looks like. I really don't like to assign papers anymore. I still do, but the idea of, "Hey, this is going to be your literacy narrative paper, and then here's your discourse analysis paper," or whatever, I feel like there's...personally, I should say, I feel like there's just too much scaffolding going on with those concepts. So what I'll do is I'll create a series of, let's say, 10 to 15 small writing prompts, and they might be organized by a particular kind of genre, or they might be framed as a particular kind of rhetorical occasion, and I'm going to tell students to engage with those prompts.

A lot of times I'm asking them to produce writing that maybe...writing a Yelp review, for example. Or it might be writing a particular piece of professional correspondence that's maybe a couple pages long. We might move through one or two of those a week. I'm constantly reading the writing, giving them feedback. And then maybe by the end of the class, I'll tell them to pick, let's say, half of those small writing assignments to go back and revise. So in that sense, I'm giving students the option to really experiment with a range of writing occasions in any given class, and then to let their own interests and questions guide which of those tasks to pursue further.

SW: These smaller tasks are really fascinating to me because in many ways it feels like it centers the writing process more than say a larger writing prompt that kind of hedges to a written product still. So maybe that's something for us to consider, how the prompt itself encourages students to think about a product even in our best attempts to focus on the writing process. Or maybe this makes us think more about how to design writing prompts or assignment prompts that detail the process more than the final product. I don't know, does any of this make sense?

WD: Absolutely, which is again when I think about...so when I used to design courses, or I should say for the longest time, I would always start with the assignments that I wanted my students to complete. There's talk of the value of backward design, for example. So maybe you start with the outcomes for a course or the goals you want and decide what kind of activities would best support those goals. And all that makes sense. But I always would start with like, "Well, I think it's important that students write a research paper. And I think it's important that students do a rhetorical analysis." I would try to make those assignments the benchmarks for a course, but inevitably what happens is that students always delay the writing of these things. And again, I think that they create arbitrary sites for anxiety.

So again, this is for me, if I can change that framing even just a little bit to say that, "Hey, we're going to experiment this week with descriptive writing and what does that mean?" Right? I give students a prompt, well, it might be that some students are going out and doing some really heady, abstract, artistic, descriptive writing about some kind of abstract process. And then another student might come back trying to describe everything that they saw in a hallway outside of class in between course periods or something like that. When, again, the goal isn't so much a product as it is a kind of thinking and a kind of writing in order to get a sense of what the experience of writing that kind of thing feels like and does.

SW: So I want to turn attention to your research, which includes collaborative writing. In your book, Beyond Conversation, you talk about how rhetoric and composition needs more theory and pedagogy on collaboration. You provide a history of collaborative writing theory tracing back to the 1980s with the social turn. Additionally, you talk about co-authorship and you ask this question, "What happens when writers compose together?" Can you talk more about your motivations for writing this book, collaboration and collaborative writing, and what you hope writing teachers and composition studies can take away from this good work?

WD: Sure, yeah. So back in 2001, two of my mentors, Hephzibah Roskelly and the late Kate Ronald published an article in *College English* about Paulo Freire as a pragmatist. One of the things they do in that article is they summarize their take on what the tenets of North American pragmatism are. Two of which are human experience is always the test of conclusions, and the second one is an idea is defined by its consequences. I think those two ideas are at the root of why I ended up writing this book. In short, I was curious about why so much of our existing theory around collaboration and collaborative writing, in particular, really seemed at odds with the experiences of it in terms of how scholars would write about those experiences. And personally as well, having a lot of mentors in graduate school who encouraged co-authorship, I was writing with others by my first year as a PhD student. And so, again, I was like, "Why do we have theories of collaboration? Why are they so abstract? Why don't they really capture the experiences that I'm having right now?"

So when I started researching the book in earnest and doing some qualitative research, in particular some interview work that never made it into the final draft, I realized that there was a lot of room to develop a theoretical orientation that was rooted in these concerns of pragmatism, including the belief that an idea is defined by its consequences, which is why the methods that I discuss in the book so often fall back or emphasize the role of co-authors naming for themselves the differences that collaboration makes for their work together. It's also why one of my favorite

chapters in the book is the last one that I co-wrote with my writing partner, John. And that actually incorporates an interview that I did with Hephzibah and Kate about their own experiences as collaborative writers. Again, I just thought that we could better explain what collaborative writing does on the rhetorical level while also figuring out ways to empower for co-authors the importance of, again, naming for themselves the processes that make a difference when they do.

SW: Will, based on your research, did you get a sense of how universities and English programs at-large value collaborative writing and co-authorship? And also, do you have any recommendations for how departments and programs might reconsider and even revise standards or policies that place a greater emphasis on single authored publications as opposed to co-authorship?

WD: Yeah, so there's a few different ways that I think you can answer this question. So scholars who study intellectual property and authorship practices in particular, for example, have long pointed out the irony of how the humanities discipline, in particular, has come to embrace critical theory and critiques of platonic individualism. Yet in practice, overwhelmingly privileged the romantic ideal of the lone creator, or at least sort of the lead creator, if you want to use that term, even in fields where co-authorship is the norm, like the social sciences. The logic guiding most of those attribution systems still atomizes individual labor.

I think it's important that we not conflate the idea of co-authorship with that of collaborative writing, especially since in most fields, the term co-authorship simply refers to sort of how researchers might share credit. It doesn't necessarily speak to the quality or the novelty of whatever shared labor a set of contributors engaged together.

So thinking in terms of recommendations and what I think scholars in the humanities can do to really reorient how we engage with questions about collaboration is, and again, I'll stick to my lane as a humanities scholar, I think first that we need to popularize and destigmatize scholarship that explicitly claims its status as collaborative. This includes, I think, co-authors need to be encouraged to and shown how to articulate the quality of the products that they produce and why that collaboration makes a difference. But there is a sort of no politics talk at the dinner table quality to the suggestion, I think. Which is to say that I've seen some of my colleagues get uncomfortable at the suggestion that we should be performatively self-reflexive in this way when we publish. But honestly, that's the only way that I know how to model for junior scholars and grad students, not to mention undergrads, that collaborative writing is just as legitimate and intellectual practice as writing alone.

And then a second, I think we just need to build in more opportunities for students to write together in all of our courses, and in a variety of contexts. I'm not suggesting that we should explicitly design collaborative assignments for students to write together, but we can provide opportunities where they are invited to experiment with various modes of co-authorship, especially if those opportunities are cumulative and if students are encouraged to continually practice collaboration across those contexts.

SW: How do you invite students to engage in collaborative writing? What does that look like in your class?

WD: So for one, I am always, always issuing invitations to my students to write together. Even when they don't take me up on it, I think these invitations help to normalize the idea of collaborative writing, which is something that the vast majority of college students are never going to have the chance to experiment with, at least not when it comes to...and I'm using this term in scare quotes, "authentic collaborative writing." By which I mean, in tech comm, for example, team writing projects are quite common, but a lot of times those projects are scaffolded by an instructor ahead of time. Part of the work is having students assume roles that are predefined. So essentially all they're really doing is figuring out how to engage in a process of project management. Whereas, I think when it comes to developing writers, the value of collaborative writing is found in all of the struggle involved in trying to figure out not just what to write, but also how to write it and how to manage that process.

I think that, again, most students are never going to have the opportunity to engage in that kind of interaction with someone else to produce a piece of writing that neither of them can predict what the outcome would be, but also a piece of writing that an instructor can't necessarily predict as well. So much resistance, I think, to collaborative writing a lot of times is linked to grades and performance, which is one reason why removing grades from writing classrooms is so important. Removing a grade as an objective anxiety from the equation, it goes a long way in helping students experiment with some of those activities that would lend them the opportunity to see for themselves the unique value that co-authorship can bring to their work together.

So what's interesting is when it comes to actual activities, I don't necessarily plan collaborative writing tasks very far in advance, but it just really depends on the class. For example, I'm currently teaching a graduate seminar focused on academic publishing, and I'm making my students experiment with writing together in a very low stakes context that I have planned for. But in my undergrad teaching right now that I'm doing, when I have suggested the idea of writing together, it's really on the fly. It's based on the questions and the struggles that I see students bringing to me. I also tell students in most of my classes that they can co-author any of the assignments and as many as they want. A lot of scholarship on teaching collaborative writing says that we have to design assignment prompts that scaffold the work in a way that it's literally impossible for one writer to complete the assignment by themselves.

But I don't think that's necessary, which is to say I don't design special prompts for collaborative writing practices. Because I think part of the joy of collaboration is using your combined efforts to transform a rhetorical situation, which isn't that what we always want our students to do? I never want my students to parrot back what I tell them. I don't want them to write what they think I want to read. I want them to transform the rhetorical occasions of writing something that I've given them and make it meaningful and useful in ways that they can articulate for themselves. I think in this way, I view assignment prompts as contingent invitations to begin writing and then to see where it goes.

And so again, that's why, to circle back around, I'm always issuing the invitation. When students do take me up on that, depending on the students, depending on the class, then I might say,

“Okay, hey, why don't we schedule a 20 minute talk next week when the three of us can sit down and just talk about strategy?” Or maybe I give them a short article or some resource. Again, depending on the project and depending on the students, there might then be some more engagement with them, helping them mediate that process. But a lot of times I'm just like, “Go for it.” Which is why I think issuing the invitation is important because when students volunteer, when they enter into a collaboration with someone because they want to, because they've selected that person, I think it's really important to let that play out on its own with as little intervention on our part as possible.

SW: Will, this is my last question and it's about response. So I'm not talking about letter grades here because I know that you don't put grades on writing. I'm more interested in how you respond to writing. How do you respond to collaborative writing projects? Does it look the same as response on an individual single authored writing task or does it look different? How do your response practices or methods change when it comes to responding to collaborative student writing projects?

WD: Yeah, absolutely. I think one of the key words that I develop in the book is the idea of resistance. I think that all writers, not just collaborative writers, but essentially what writers do is they engage with and transform resistance. So again, this is something I talked about in the book a little bit, one of the shortcomings of so much of the social constructionist sort of approach to collaboration that developed in...between 1980-1995 or so, there was a lot of compositionists wrote about the ethics of collaboration, pedagogies of collaboration, challenges, and so much of that discussion, I think, got stuck in the dichotomy of conflict versus consensus. You want to aim for consensus, but oh, no, we can't aim for it. Because aiming for consensus is not ethical way to do it, so we have to make room for conflict. But students don't know how to manage conflict.

I think that I sort of embraced the idea. My idea of resistance speaks to all of the things that make us pause in the writing process. All the things. Material things, the abstract things, and the challenge that collaborative writers face is how to engage with and account for all of the resistances to their writing that they're going to experience. Resistances that inevitably are amplified and more visible because we're writing with someone. When we're writing by ourself, all of the habits and, as John Hodgman would say, the little weirdies of our writing process, they can go unnoticed. But when writing with someone else, suddenly our process, the things that we do, our habits are suddenly more visible to us because we know that they're visible to someone else.

To answer your question, it just depends on the students involved with the classes. But if we're talking about novice writers, if we're talking about first year writers or sophomores, even juniors who are really writing together for the first time, especially if they're writing something that in another context might be considered a higher stakes piece of writing, so maybe they are writing something that resembles like a more conventional paper, I definitely ask them to try and document the process as much as possible. But that is something that we talk about. Where my practice departs from earlier pedagogical recommendations, so I've read a lot of pedagogy that says after a collaborative project or a team project always have the students write a personal reflection at the end. What did they get out of the process? Sometimes we might even ask students to assess themselves.

That's useful, but I do tell students when they do enter into collaborative writing scenario together, especially if it's, again, a little bit higher stakes, I do say that I'm going to expect them to also write a collaborative reflection by the end of this. They can pick the form. If they would rather do what we're doing and create an audio recording, a conversation, they can do that. But I do want them to set aside time to together go through and talk about the collaboration itself as a collaboration, to try and for themselves name what differences it made, if it did make a difference. This is the thing that I think a lot of people struggle with, both students and instructors. Collaboration, like all writing, can and does fail. It doesn't work. It doesn't yield the kind of results we were hoping for.

So I have absolutely seen student writers who, for any host of reasons, just the collaboration it kind of fizzles out and it's not really successful. But I do still think there's value there in stepping back and saying, "Well, why is that the case?" So, yeah, I think that getting rid of the grades is really important. If what we're crediting students for is the labor that they're putting into the work, then asking students to sit back and sort of critique that labor together, what more could we ask students to do than to develop and practice how they think about and talk about writing with others?

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