Episode 50: Jacob Babb
Pedagogue podcast
Transcript

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

Did you know Pedagogue was on Twitter? You can follow us @_Pedagogue_ for updates and book giveaways. We're also on Instagram, @pedagoguepodcast. And if you're new to Pedagogue, each episode is a conversation with a post-secondary writing teacher: graduate students, emeriti, distinguished teacher-scholars, and emerging teacher-scholars from two-year colleges, four-year universities, private universities, research universities, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). In short, this podcast is designed to amplify diverse voices at various institutions. A podcast for writing teachers about teaching writing. In this episode, I talk with Jacob Babb about writing program administration, spatial rhetoric, transitioning as a writing program administrator, supporting faculty, and bluegrass music in the writing classroom.

Jacob Babb is Associate Professor of English at Indiana University Southeast. He is co-editor of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*. He publishes on composition theory and pedagogy, writing program administration, and rhetoric. He has published articles in *Composition Forum*, *Composition Studies*, *Harlot*, and *WPA: Writing Program Administration* and chapters in several edited collections. He is the co-editor of WPAs in Transition: Navigating Educational Leadership Positions (Utah State UP, 2018) and The Things We Carry: Strategies for Recognizing and Negotiating Emotional Labor in Writing Program Administration (Utah State UP, 2020).

Jacob, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I know that you're involved in writing program administration (WPA) and obviously as the co-editor of WPA: Writing Program Administration you work closely with writing program administrators. What writing program administration scholarship has influenced your practices and the ways you've developed your program at Indiana University Southeast?

JB: There are so many different avenues of scholarship to talk about here. I think, for instance, about the types of scholarship that made me interested in doing this work to begin with. So for instance, *GenAdmin*, a book that was published, I think about 10 years ago now. *GenAdmin* helped me to think about my own scholarly identity and to think about how the work I had already been doing at that time in my PhD program and prior to coming into my PhD program shaped the kind of work that I wanted to do. Ever since I have been involved in studying writing, I had been involved in some form of Writing Program Administration, whether it was helping to run a writing center or operating as an assistant director for different writing programs.

I've always found that work to be extremely engaging and knew that that was a big part of who I wanted to be as a scholar, as a teacher. And so *GenAdmin* really captured that concept, the idea that WPA isn't just a job that we do. WPA is what gives shape to the work we want to do. It's

what gives shape to the kinds of questions we ask in our scholarship. It gives shape to the types of communities we want to participate in.

I also think a lot about different kinds of pieces of advice I've gotten from WPAs over the years. And one article in particular…Laura Micciche wrote about slow agency. The idea that WPA work pushes us to feel like we have to solve problems quickly. We are always reacting. We're always responding to other things going on, but we need to think about how to slow down our work. We need to cultivate a philosophy of taking a slow approach to writing program administration. Because most of the types of problems that we wrestle with as WPAs can never be solved quickly. In fact, trying to solve problems quickly typically makes situations worse.

When I was first becoming a WPA here at IU Southeast, I participated in the WPA workshop that happens every year at the Council of Writing Program Administrators Conference. And one of the people facilitating that workshop at the time was Linda Adler-Kassner. And we had a meeting, just she and I, during this workshop to talk about the kinds of specific issues that I was trying to deal with as a new WPA, the kinds of curricular issues, whatever it was that I wanted to take on in this role. Well, I was brand new, not only to the role of WPA, but to the institution. I had only been here for a year and I wanted to solve everything and I wanted to do it now. And one of the best pieces of advice I ever got was from Linda saying, be patient. You're not going to be able to do all of this at once. And in fact, if you try to do all of this at once, you're probably going to burn many of the bridges that you need to try to wrestle with different issues. It's the advice that we have to pause and think what kinds of short and long-term plans do we want to make.

SW: I think that's really good advice. What did you do, or how did you use that advice to come up with a plan or goal that you wanted to work on in your writing program?

JB: What it really involved was mapping out challenges and issues that I face at my institution. Heeding this call was really valuable because it made me pause to look around and say, okay, what is it exactly that I think most needs to be done, not necessarily what I in particular want to focus on, but what it would be most beneficial to focus on. That meant getting to know our part-time instructors. At IU Southeast, we don't have a graduate program and we have a small full-time faculty. There are 10 of us who teach writing full-time and the rest of the faculty are part-time instructors.

I knew some of them reasonably okay in the beginning, but I didn't know them that well. In order to do anything else in a writing program, you have to build trust among the people that you work with. So for the next two years, it became a priority for me to get to know our part-time instructors, to observe their classes, to meet with them from time to time, to go into their shared office space and strike up conversations with them just to get to know who they were, get a sense of what they thought the challenges in their classrooms were like, and to get an idea of what they wanted from me as a WPA.

SW: As I mentioned before, you're the co-editor of WPA, a journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators. So you've read and engaged in a lot of scholarship on program administration and have really collaborated with administrators across the nation. WPA work is so local, so it has to be driven by local challenges and resources and frameworks and systems. That said, is there a through line you've noticed as a co-editor that helps construct sustainable writing programs?

JB: Well, in my work as an editor, what I have learned probably the most is that I have to approach every text in a very open-minded way. Writing programs are these fascinating creatures because they are, as you said, they are locally so context bound. Every program looks different from every other program because it's answering to different stakeholders and it's trying to accomplish different goals. Overall, we have similar goals, we're trying to improve writing and writers, but what that looks like from one place to another is usually pretty drastically different.

What I've learned from my work as an editor, and really, I would say fairly more just as being a member of CWPA, it is incredibly helpful to look at the way other programs work because yes, the context is different, but the way they have approached different problems can give you a new perspective in how to think about your own program. I think when I am sitting in my office and I am thinking about a particular challenge that our writing program is facing, it is very easy for me to feel bound by the ruts that I have dug in my thinking as I approach problems in a certain way.

We all do. And so it's always helpful to say, "Okay. So that person at this other institution, even though that institution is drastically different from mine, came at this same problem from an entirely different angle. What if I think about that? What if I think about a new way to approach it that's based on that?" I think a lot of the work that's going on in Writing Program Administration now is based in that principle, is based in the idea that, say for instance, with scholarship on writing about writing and teaching for transfer. We're seeing a lot of broad trends in how to do this work well and how to think programmatically about teaching writing in ways that we hadn't before, but adapting writing for writing and teaching for transfer and for really any approach like that to a program requires a lot of careful thought about the context that you work in. So it goes back to what I was saying earlier, mapping out the challenges you face, mapping out the people that your program serves and the people that your program has some kind of impact on gives you the perspective to think about how to adapt all of these different ideas from other institutions to your own.

SW: I'm always interested in how research intersects with teaching and vice versa, or how teaching informs administration and vice versa. One of your research interests include spatial rhetoric. How do you intersect spatial rhetoric with writing program administration, or how does spatial rhetoric inform your work as WPA?

JB: Well, Shane, it's kind of you to think that maybe they do intersect. There are certainly times when I have to ask that same question, how do these pieces of my professional identity intersect with one another? And I don't always have a great answer for that, but my work in spatial

rhetoric has been at this point, primarily on the pedagogical end. I've taught a lot of classes in spatial rhetoric. I've done a lot of work with students on studying how public memory works and thinking about how physical environment shapes social interaction.

Indirectly, the way that that impacts WPA work is it increases my own awareness of how I occupy space. So for instance, I think about when I go into observe instructors, I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that my physical presence has a dramatic impact on how that class is going to go. And I try to do my best to be as least disruptive as I can be in that scenario. But I know I am that guy sitting in the back of the classroom usually taking notes on my laptop saying nothing. And I also know from just about everybody I've ever met telling me that my typical facial structure suggests that maybe I'm unhappy.

And so a lot of what I've had to do over the years is to think it's not important when I'm observing the class to look neutral because my neutral facial expression has a different impact on the instructor who is occasionally looking at me to see how things are resonating with me or the students who are looking over and saying, who is this guy and why is he here? So I work a little harder now to smile and to laugh. And if that means that my physical presence is actually a little more amplified as a result, that's okay, because the point of that activity is to put the instructor at ease and to put the students at ease.

When a WPA does their work well, they are invisible. That's something I've frequently thought about as I've done this job is that when I'm doing what I'm supposed to do, people don't notice I'm here and that's not a bad thing most of the time. It means that things are going smoothly and that people seek me out when they need help. So if people aren't seeking me out, things are probably okay. It is a pretty good metric for that.

SW: Your co-edited collection, WPAs in Transition, offers narratives and frameworks for teacher-scholars who are entering, navigating, or exiting WPA work. I was hoping we could talk about these transitions, specifically maybe the person who is hired to be a WPA, and then maybe the person who has been a faculty member and inherits the role of WPA. Talk us through these transitions and share how you would help someone navigate this new role.

JB: I think when someone is transitioning into the role, it is impossible to be invisible because all of a sudden you are in a role that everyone else has seen someone else in. And everyone is looking to you a little nervous, a little anxious to see how you're going to operate. Inevitably, no matter how smoothly a transition goes, no matter how much time people have had to prepare for a transition, no single person is going to perform this role like any other person. There are always going to be differences in the way that we approach these positions.

When I announced this past semester that I was ending my current term as WPA, one of my part-time instructors came up to me at the end of the meeting and very candidly said, so who do I need to suck up to now? And I loved that comment because it so baldly drew attention to the kinds of power dynamics that are in play in these transitional moments. He was of course joking,

I hope, but he's right. He now needs to cultivate relationships with someone else. He now needs to know who else to turn to, to talk to about his course schedule or when he's having a problem with a student.

Because even though he's had that relationship with me for five years, I have stepped out of that role when he now has to do that with someone else. For somebody stepping into the role, a few things to bear in mind. First of all, like I was saying earlier, you can not solve every problem immediately. The best thing you can do is to sit back and listen for a little while, as much as you can, and try to create a list of priorities. What are the demands that this job put on you and what are the kinds of things that you want to accomplish?

What are the kinds of things that other people in your department want you to accomplish? If you have interaction with other administrators, say for instance, deans, what are they looking for from you? Do your best to understand the landscape that you have stepped into. And that's going to take time and patience. One of the best pieces I've read in our scholarship about, this is tragically not in the collection that we put together, but it is by one of our authors and that's Laura J. Davies who wrote a piece called "Grief and the New WPA" that she published in the *WPA* journal.

And it is a really effective examination of the emotional response of other people in a department when a new WPA steps in. It's a type of grief. It's an understandable response to an absence. And those people need that time to make adjustments. So in the beginning, while you are gathering your ideas of how to respond to the role, that same time that you are taking to do that is the time that others around you get to look at you and start accepting you in the role. So a bit of slowness in the beginning is really valuable for everybody involved.

SW: So you're in the middle of transition out or exiting. Do you mind talking about what that's been like?

JB: Well, I knew that I was exiting the position when I was for about a year. And so I had a year to prepare myself for that, and I knew who was going to be taking my place. So I had lots of informal conversations with her and some more formal meetings where we talked in great detail about lots of transitional materials. I tried to create more document trails than I already had been creating and to more consciously make note of why I was making some decisions and why some processes work one way rather than another way in hopes that giving those materials to the new WPA would help her to resolve that slowness actually a little more quickly, to step in and feel comfortable in the role.

Inevitably, no person is going to be able to do that completely, but any transition like this is better when you have strong communication in between the person transitioning out and the person transitioning in. It is not with no small amount of glee that I stepped out of the role. I had been WPA with a little interruption for five years, and I was ready for a change. So I'm on sabbatical now. And when I come back in the fall, I'm going to be department chair. So from one

type of leadership role to another type, and that is certainly a transition, and it requires from me different obligations in different engagements with the faculty.

But the benefit for me in this process is my department has already seen how I operate as a leader in the program, which is why they entrusted me to move to this other position. And they're not terribly worried about me being able to do that job, and so I'm trying to have a little faith in their judgment that I shouldn't be worried about it too much either. But yeah, what that means for me is this is an entire year of transition. What I think about when I think about transitioning is the need for us to be kind to ourselves and patient with ourselves, to be kind and patient with those we work with and to think about how these transitions impact our students as well.

SW: You mentioned working closely with faculty, which is a large part of what WPAs do. And we've been talking a lot about transitions. I feel like as a junior faculty member, I'm still carving out my own transition and the time and energy it takes to teach, research, mentor, and serve the program. How do you cultivate relationships with faculty and create spaces for productivity and growth?

JB: Well, when I arrived at IU Southeast, I felt pretty keenly the isolation that I think a lot of junior faculty feel when they first leave graduate school and are in their first job and are having to create scholarship and having to create these productive patterns of living that can lead to tenure and promotion. I wanted to find ways to feel less isolated. That operated in multiple forms. I formed a Facebook group with scholars at the same stage in their careers. That Facebook group is still active. We still check in with each other all the time.

We are now all seven years further down the road, and so our needs have changed over time. But we tend to draw on each other now more for support and for talking out different kinds of ideas and scenarios that we're in. But what was important about that in the beginning was I needed somebody that I could say, hey, I need to write something and I need somebody to help hold me accountable. When I was a graduate student at UNC Greensboro, I was involved in leading some graduate student writing groups. And the principle of these writing groups were based on Paul. Silvia's *How to Write a Lot*.

And we met weekly. We set goals for the week and we spent time writing in each other's physical presence. We sat there and we wrote together for a couple of hours. When I came to IU Southeast, I was approached by somebody who worked in our teaching and learning center who knew I had done that work and asked me if I would be interested in doing something like that here. Yes. I was very interested in doing that. So over time, I've had to write several grants in order to get money to fund this process. But slowly, I have been working to cultivate a consciousness among faculty at IU Southeast that supporting faculty writers is important, that offering support to each other is important, that not working in isolation and that talking with each other about the work that we do serves a lot of different purposes.

Also, my sneaky pedagogical goal the entire time has always been, if I get faculty in a room from chemistry, from history, from English, whatever discipline, I get to talk to them about writing pedagogy. I don't necessarily call it that, but I get to talk to them about how writing processes work and about how my process is different from that person's process and theirs is going to be different from a person over here. We write differently. We approach the challenges of writing differently. And at some point, I always try to emphasize with these faculty members, the same is true for our students.

They write differently than we do. The way they respond to prompts is differently than we would think they would respond when we write them. And I think increasing faculty members' awareness of their own writing process potentially makes them better teachers because it positions them to see that their students also wrestle with these kinds of academic and intellectual challenges differently. So I think supporting faculty writers is important not only because faculty writers need community with one another and in an institution it's really valuable to know the kinds of work that your colleagues are doing from a pedagogical perspective.

It makes us better teachers just as much as it makes us better writers.

SW: This is my last question. I'm from Kentucky and I believe you live around Louisville, so I've got to ask this question about bluegrass because I know you play bluegrass music. How does playing bluegrass alongside a community of musicians inform how you approach the writing classroom and how you talk with students about what it means to compose and make meaning?

JB: So many of us try to teach writing through metaphor, and I think metaphor is such a powerful instrument for shaping the way that we think about things. Metaphors are terministic screens. These are ways that we are taught to face different challenges and to pose different kinds of questions. And whenever I am talking with my students about how to write, I try to find these analogous points in their lives, something that they can connect to, some other process-based thing that they do in their lives. For me, inevitably, that's music.

I've been playing bluegrass since I was 15 years-old, and so I think about a lot of writing from a musical perspective. I think about the fact that as a bluegrass banjo player, I draw on a number of what we call "licks." They're just standard phrases in music in order to build different kinds of solos. I don't create these things from scratch. I have a lot of these pieces that I assemble in order to make a whole, which is just another word for composition. So it's useful for me to think about writing as a musician because I can see the smaller and the whole mostly at the same time that way.

And certainly, my students, whether they are musicians themselves or not, doesn't always necessarily matter. Most of us have a lot of contact with music. Music is important to most of us. So we can engage in thinking about process just by looking at how different pieces of music are put together. One of my favorite podcasts is Song Exploder, which pulls apart a song piece by piece and has the composer talk about how they put the song together, the kinds of decisions they

made when they wrote a different line or when they mixed it in a different way. It is a show that talks very consciously about the decision-making that goes into composition. Especially with first year students, I like to play that podcast in class for them to let them hear somebody talk about the way that they created a text in this very conscious, very careful way, which then gives us the space in class to talk about how to create a heuristic or reflecting on our writing, how do we talk about research writing or any kind of writing that we're doing in ways we are conscious of the decisions we're making.

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