

# 113. Spring 2025 Semester Reflection: Meaningful Teaching, Student Engagement, & Well-being

**Dan Dissinger:** [00:00:00] Welcome everyone to another episode of Writing Remix. I'm [00:01:00] your host, Dan Dissinger and today we're going to be doing a solo episode, a reflection on the end of the 2025 spring semester. Um, as we're recording this, or as I'm recording this, it's June 3rd. Um, so it's been about a month now since the semester USC has ended.

All grades been submitted and some downtime has been had. And we'll, I'm gonna talk all about that. Um, first I want everyone to please, you know, like, and subscribe and review the writing remix. And also share sharing the episode is like the most important part because it lets people know about the podcast.

Word of mouth. This is an ad free podcast. It is a independent podcast. And so sharing. Is definitely, um, one of the number one ways to get the word out about writing remix. And so please do that. Follow us on social [00:02:00] media at writing Remix Pod and Substack. Um, I'm gonna be writing a lot more this summer on Substack and you'll be able to actually get the video of this episode on Substack.

Uh, once we fix some of the issues in terms of RSS and everything, we'll be able to get all the episodes on YouTube. Audio and also more video and stuff like that. But for right now, join the Substack, um, write comment, send me notes. Email me at [writingremixpodcast@gmail.com](mailto:writingremixpodcast@gmail.com). If you would like to book me on your podcast or, you know, also leave messages and leave comments and questions, uh, for future episodes.

Um, but now that that's out of the way. I had like to talk about the end of the semester. Um, this is something I've been, um, thinking about doing for a little bit now, and, um, I. It's definitely something that over the last few years [00:03:00] at USC that I've been really having, probably the big, one of the bigger challenges for me is when the semester ends.

It's something that I feel like happened in terms of after all my adjunct work in New York, um, and doing all the. Hustle work there in terms of tutoring as much as I was doing in New York and poetry readings and workshops and everything. Um, so I think what happened for me was once I was able to get this

full-time position in the writing program at USC, I figured that I wouldn't need to do any of that or was lost all of that as well.

And so summertime, if I wasn't teaching in the summer. Became a real huge gap at time that was very difficult for me to, um, deal with. Um, not that I don't have other work and other projects like this podcast or my other podcast and nostalgia test podcast [00:04:00] or writing projects as a poet and, and everything.

I think it's just the unstructured time after the 15 weeks truly, um, throws me for a loop. So, definitely wanna. I'm gonna dive into that. Um, but some of the first, some of the things I wanna talk about first are kind of how the approach to this semester worked out. Um, one of the things that I started doing in the last couple of semesters at USC is implementing way more reading into my syllabus.

So not just readings like articles, and. Kind of disconnected in a way, disparate pieces in, in that way. But actual books onto the syllabus. Um, this definitely comes out of my work as a literature professor when I was in New York doing more literature courses and writing courses that were literature based and also theory classes and, and things like that.

So this semester I have two books on my syllabus. Um, the first book was Exile and Pride [00:05:00] by the poet writer Academic Eli Claire. Um, it's a book that absolutely amazing work. Um, autoethnographic Memoir, academic, um, just. Everything that you would want as a writing teacher. I feel like for me, in my classes and the way I run my classes, um, that helped students unpack a lot of, not just analysis, but self-reflection and how to use that in their work.

Um, Eli Claire digs really deeply into their, um, story in terms of disability, in terms of sustainability. Idea on home, um, being a, being a queer writer, being a teacher, I mean, e everything that right now in the climate of our [00:06:00] world has been something that. Is being a trying where people are trying to erase and people are gonna, are trying to take away from our students and us as human beings and each other in our community.

This book confronts that head on with a lot of love and a lot of. Self-reflection. Um, it's, it's a book that I recommend to any professors out there that are doing any sort of work in terms of identity, disability, in terms of L-G-B-T-Q-A plus community, uh, readings. In terms of just ideas on self-reflection, I think this is a book that we don't have to.

Pigeonhole into just identity and identity and diversity courses or anything like that. This is a book I think that across the board everyone should read actually, especially maybe if you're doing a first year seminar course. My students absolutely loved [00:07:00] reading Exile Pride, and it showed them not only that you can write academically.

And personally at the same time, but it also showed them how to utilize not just this idea of counter argument, but looking at perspective from a much wider space. Eli Claire is from a logging community and. They definitely are looking at the ideas of sustainability and environmentalism and being critical of that, but at the same time, looking at the, how the role of capitalism has created this divide between communities and how we tend to demonize one another and attack one another when really we don't have any sort of.

Humanized approach to one another. Eli Claire looks at the impact of, [00:08:00] uh, the economic impacts as well on these communities. And when it turn in terms of if we take something from them, how or how will their families and how will they survive and what will they turn to? Um. So there's a real push and pull, and I don't think Eli Claire has an answer.

And I think that's also something really important is that we don't have to have answers at the end of books as much as have moments of contemplation and exile and pride does that, and I recommend that book so highly. It's, it's a beautiful book. Uh, and Eli Claire has written very widely. Um, and so I, that one book really was amazing.

The other book that I paired with Exile Pride this semester was, um, all About Love by bell hooks. It's a book I did last semester and it, it's a book that I've read now a few times and I. You. You'll also see on a [00:09:00] future episode of Inspired Belonging on Writing Remix, uh, with Stephanie Renee Payne. We will, we talk about a lot of the bell hooks books that touch us mostly and that are impactful and all about Love is one of those books.

I can't recommend this book more. Just if you have not read all about love, read it. If you have read about all, all about Love, read it again. It is a book that I want to read at least once a year, and um, I. My students who were all mainly seniors graduating, um, were floored by the work in this book and were just couldn't thank me enough for giving them an opportunity to read this before graduating.

You know, I take their, that with a grain of salt as well. I want to be a, a teacher who provides. [00:10:00] Meaningfulness in the classroom. So choosing this

book is not so much about trying to flex some sort of academic know-how, but it's a book that I know I, I need to read and remind myself of all the time. So in reading it in community with my students has also been quite, um, revealing for myself.

It's a book that when I teach it, I know I have to prepare to be as vulnerable as I possibly can and, um, prepare myself for the vulnerability of my students. And, uh, this book impacted not just the writing, which I will talk about it this semester, but it impacted the class conversations. We're in a time that I feel like books like this will.

Not only encourage people to [00:11:00] be more loving towards one another and more open, but it will encourage people to build bridges with one another where we are mainly building walls. This is a book that is so necessary. Um, so I, I'm encouraging everyone to just read it and please reach out and let me know if you have, I would love to hear, you know, your thoughts on it.

I had students tell me that. It showed them that they don't have to accept the abuse from not just people, but from programs as well. Education doesn't have to be abusive. They told me that they now know that they can go and look for jobs that in places that have a love ethic, they told me that. They loved how bell hooks ends this book [00:12:00] in a place of spirituality and magic and unknown.

And that an academic book can be vulnerable. That it can not just, doesn't just have to be mentally um, engaging, but can be emotionally and spiritually engaging, and spiritually as in any way that you know, you see fit. And I. When, when we read this book, we were coming, it was the second half of the semester, so the larger projects were being developed, and I would say the quality of those projects were much better than I had could ever expect.

The thing about reading two books in a semester, which I know seems like some of you, especially literature professors who are listening to this and being like. Well, Dan, this is only two books. You know, we read, you know, double or more than that in a semester, and I get [00:13:00] it. But I think in a writing course, in the writing courses at USC, the, the pedagogical approach has been to not overdo the reading and to really push much more word count in terms of writing assignments.

And I get that, but I, as a. A PhD student at St. John's had the pleasure of working with, uh, Dr. Ann Geller on, um, coding and, and doing interviews about the Meaningful Writing Project, which is a book that everyone should

read. It's out there. Definitely check that out. It's a book that she did with a bunch of other colleagues in writing programs across the country and.

I try to keep that idea of meaningful projects and meaningful work inside my own pedagogy in the classroom. I think, and I will speak on this in a, in a later episode about my own career, but I will say that like once I [00:14:00] left to come to USC, that somehow along the way that got lost and I became very, very focused on making my class.

Quote, unquote, rigorous and hard. Students still had positive experiences, but I think as I've redone that and done a lot of work on myself, a lot of emotional work and a lot of spiritual work and a lot of self-reflection and have had a lot of,

how do I say this now? I would say a lot of. Deeply tumultuous moments in the last few years and, and climbing outta that, that the course doesn't have to break a student down as much as I felt like USC wanted me to do it, that [00:15:00] I can build way more build up. And so this semester with all about love and exile and pride leading the way in terms of allowing students to do meaningful work, I decided to pull back a lot more on homework assignments and not so much say we're doing this amount, but move through the re the, uh, the semester.

We're going. Now's a good time for a writing. Uh, a piece of homework, right? So at the end of this semester, we did four, um, additional pieces of writing on top of the three or four major writing projects. And each time we did one of these, um, ancillary assignments, so to say, or homework assignments. The students really approached it with way more meaningfulness.

So I was getting things that went [00:16:00] beyond the idea of a reading response, which I don't do. And it wasn't like, here's 500 words. Some students were doing 1200, 1500 word. Homework assignments because they had time to work with it. They had time in between where they weren't just bombarded with writing assignments, but they were able to develop that, that work for that homework assignment, a homework assignment, and do it in a meaningful way.

It also gave me. Time to rest between grading. And I, and I think this is something I want to talk a lot about in this episode, is that outside of recalibrating my, my, my, um, class this semester in terms of meaningfulness, in terms of embodiedness, in terms of focus on self-love and, and what it means to kind of understand what it is that.

The life that we want to live, um, in terms [00:17:00] of interdependently with one another, but also a lot of my students graduating. It's like, what do you want

to, how do you want to live your life after here? Is that like I have control over the grading cycle. I get to place where my projects come in. And I get to place where and how many homework assignments my students do.

Having two books actually was less, um, strenuous than having to pick multiple readings every week and trying to figure that out. I knew that for a few weeks we'd be reading exile and Pride. I knew for the rest of the time we'd be reading all about love and I knew somewhere in there we'd read a chapter or so of Pedagogy to oppressed.

So my readings were set. If I wanted an ancillary assignment, I gave it to them a, a reading or something to listen to. Uh, one day we, we, I had my students walk [00:18:00] around campus and listen to the, um, the. Commencement speech from David Foster Wallace. Um, all, um, um, what's it called? Uh, is this water? One day I had my students, uh, walk around campus listening to David Foster Wallace's, uh, commencement speech.

Um, is this water? And um, that really was impactful as well for them. But the most important thing was making sure that we were taking care of ourselves. And, and I think that means pulling back on the amount of assignments so that we all could have time with them, whether making, writing them and me assessing them, that was a big change and it made it a much more enjoyable semester for, for me and for my students.

And I don't think doing less assignments isn't student centered. [00:19:00] In fact, I, I believe that it was absolutely student centered so that they can focus on doing meaningful and purposeful work. Everything they did, they had a lot more time and I, I figure that that's something I'm going to take into fall 2025 as well.

Another main difference for this semester for me was doing a lot of in-class reflection by hand as much as possible. I had all my students buy notebooks and we did a lot of opening questions where they wrote in their notebooks. No one had to ever share their reflection work. I don't believe in having to force students to share their reflections or even have them share their writing in terms of what they wrote in, uh, wrote on.

I wanted much more for them to. Focus on writing, and then we're talking afterwards about the experience of engaging the reflection question. So it was much more about like, was it difficult? [00:20:00] What were some of the resistances? What types of things did you feel physically when having to. Do

this reflection question and then if they wanted to share they could, but no one ever really, um, was forced to.

That was a huge change because it made us also be able to do other writing that wasn't just assignment writing. And, and the notebooks were. Became such a big part of the class, so, and that, that's something else I'm going to take into the next semester too, especially in terms of this idea where everyone's just trying to figure out what do we do with the AI issue and stuff like that.

And I do feel like it means for me, being. Focusing more on meaningfulness, self-reflection, self-realization, and also work that they can do by hand that allows them to tap into other parts of their brain where the writing is more low stakes. I feel like the more low stakes work I can do with them in terms of writing, [00:21:00] when it comes to the high stakes work, like major writing projects, they don't feel as.

Nervous about approaching that work. So that would, that's something that I think for me this semester changed a lot of things in the classroom. So I really wanna talk about the end of this semester. I. 15, the end of the semester feels for me, this is personal for me, that it feels like a rush to the end.

I, I'm trying to grade as much as possible every single day. Grading and grading as much as I can, trying to finish everything, you know, like in a single day, which is not healthy at all. So once when the semester ends, and especially this semester when the grades are submitted. The next day I fell into a deep crashing sort of [00:22:00] depression because there's nothing, not that there's nothing to do.

There's nothing to do. So the energy for me, I. It vanishes very quickly, and, uh, when I crash, I crash very hard. And the emotional toll on that is very difficult. And, and over the last few years has been very hard to take, um, especially if I'm not teaching in the summer, like this summer. So I don't have any structured time.

That structured time and that rush, that workaholism that I really tap into, which is also something that I would like to talk about in a future episode, um, doesn't, isn't there anymore. And so like I feel like my purpose vanishes and I don't know how to come to terms with that. It's like a 15 week rush, [00:23:00] and then you hit a wall and you, I feel like I'm alive, but I can't move and I don't feel.

Very healthy at that time. The difference between this semester and some other ones is that I didn't physically get sick. A lot of the times, I run myself so ragged during the whole semester and I physically get ill in terms of a cold or a flu, and I have to. You know, take the first few weeks of my break and then I, I'm just recovering physically this semester.

That didn't happen and I'm very thankful for that. And I think it was because of the amount of work I didn't do during the rest of the semester in terms of the busy work, the committee work, the constant, um, grading because I took real toll over the idea of like, what's meaningful here. Um, instead of what's.

What do I feel like [00:24:00] I have to prove? But the crash is still the same because I was really doing my grading in a way that was just not conducive to a healthy end. It, it was like I was grading. All hours of the day and night. So when I hit that depression, it's, it's, it's very debilitating. Um, and so right now I'd feel like I'm finally, you know, climbing out of it.

And, um, today is a really good day and I think it's something that all teachers maybe. Maybe other teachers also experience it. So if you, if you do, I'd love to hear about your experiences. You can email me or drop it in the comments here or on Instagram. You could DM me on Instagram. Uh, because I feel like in terms of the profession of being a teacher, um, in higher ed or, or K through 12.

Is that one of the things people don't understand is this thing that's like, [00:25:00] oh, well you all have summer break or you have all this time off and it's just like, yeah, I have time off from work from my job. 15 weeks of teaching, especially in higher ed, 15 weeks feels. Like a full year because it's, you are attempting to get in as much as you can in this very accelerated period of time, and the break is necessary in order for us to recover, especially for, for me, for me to recover.

Um, I do other work. I do this. I, I'm a writer, I'm a workshop facilitator. I, you know, have family that I'd like to see that I live far away from and friends that I live far away from, but it's hard to get, I. You know, to constantly [00:26:00] possibly explain that to people. And I think that that for me is something I'm working on not doing anymore because this is a job that I chose.

Like I chose this profession and other people chose their professions and everyone knows what the realities are. Um, and so like, I'm not trying to validate, but I do think that I would like to just say that. Something that I've been trying to understand is like, why do I feel so depressed at the end of the semester, even though like a rest is needed?

And I think it's just such an. Expending so much energy and then there's nothing there. You know, you create all these relationships and all these bonds and everything, and then there, and then the next day you wake up and you know there's, and there's nothing. There's nothing to do. Not that well, not that there's nothing to do, but there's no job.

And it doesn't come back until, you know, [00:27:00] when it does. Of course, this is just me. A lot of people deal with it a lot better than I do, and, and so this is much more of a personal reflection on, on how it ends for me, um, and trying to find purpose after the semester. So that, that's a big challenge for me and I think I'm gonna be doing a lot more writing and a lot more podcasting, a solo episode.

So definitely. Um. Please, like, you know, reach out and let me know what you think.

Something that I think at the end of this semester that I am very proud of, which is very hard for me to kind of talk about being proud of things. It's, uh, something I'm, I am always working on, um, is that. I really feel like I came back to the core reason why I do this job. Um, and that's to hopefully I.[00:28:00]

Learn as much as I can from my students while they learn from me. I think it's also to show, especially this semester with everything happening around us, all the negativity and the hatred and the violence and the political upheaval and, and how, how scared everyone is, is that in the classroom for that hour and 20 minutes.

We get to do that together. Like that's something that I feel is sacred and I want, I want to create a sacred space where we can do that work. I. Not so much to kind of try and change the entire world, that that's something that I think for me, I could fall into and be, and I have, and [00:29:00] that really, um, created a lot of mental and emotional issues for myself.

But I think to show students that, like if you work inward. We do it together in community in this moment, if we're all there to do that, if we, if we, if we promise to do some of that a little bit at a time at all, you know, when we're in this classroom that we can make that better. And that's the only thing that I know that I can.

Promise and, and I really held myself to that and I hope it was successful and I want to, going into the fall semester, continue that work. This classroom is the

place where we can work together in community. And I know [00:30:00] that writing classes can be very, um. Taxing on the teacher and the student, and I want it to be something that people come into knowing that they will be taking care of, and that when they leave, that if they ever needed me, that they can reach out.

Um, for whatever it is that they need. I've get that from a lot of my teachers that I've had, and that is my promise, always at the end of the semester to them, that they can always reach out to me. I am, I. This episode is not so much to kind of pat myself on the back. I really do want people to know that these, these things took time for me to, to figure out.

And I'm always learning and always changing with all the, [00:31:00] uh, feedback from students that we, you know, at the end, the, you know, this class will change. And actually the way the class is now is from a whole bunch of student. Feedback. There's no way that this class would be the way it is without the student feedback at the end.

And I'm not talking about student evaluations, like I'm talking about a true conversation in class with students on what worked, what didn't work. And, and that's one of my favorite things to do with them at the end. And so hopefully by next semester we will be doing a little more with the work shopping, uh, students wanted that.

Um, we are keeping all about love on the syllabus. I'm also gonna keep exile and pride, and this is, even though I'm going into teaching Writing 150, which is the first year class, because a lot of students said they wish they read both these books as first year students. So I'm gonna be doing this for my first year students.

Um, I'm looking forward to it. I [00:32:00] think I'm. Excited, you know, to be in the classroom. I know it's only June, but I really love what I do and I think I'm finally hitting the stride that I wanted to, um, at USC and, and really making the class the way I always felt would be best for. Students and for myself, because it is a collaboration with them, we do everything collaboratively.

The syllabus at this point is collaborative. The, the rubrics, the assignments, um, there's a lot of freedom and I am. It, I couldn't do it without my students, and I realized that so much more this semester than any other semester. I think that I've really come to a deeply vulnerable [00:33:00] place where I know the class is both our classes and that I'm there mainly as a guide.

However they need me to help, you know, guide them through whatever it is that they're doing, and they do the, the same for me. You know, this is a trust building space, you know, that I, I tell them. Um, lastly with the spring 2025 semester, I feel, I feel hopeful. I know it's, it, it's in a time where hope is really difficult to kind of grab onto.

Teaching these three classes made me feel hopeful and each of my students really allowed for me to be myself. And I'm hope that they felt the same way, that they felt that they could be themselves. Um, I hope they learn something. I hope that they continue to write. I, I, [00:34:00] I want all my students to continue to write from the first students I ever had in 2009 all the way to now.

I. And that in the end they could see that it's not so much about the grade that they received and earned, but that, that there was a project, there was something there, there was a book, there was a moment, there was a conversation that was meaningful and that will stay with them hopefully, um, and show them that there is a lot of light and there's a lot of hope in the world sometimes where they feel like there is none.

Um, so I hope my classroom was, that was that place for them. Well, thank you everyone for listening to this, um, much more stream of consciousness episode. Um, I. You know, I am looking forward to doing more solo episodes and reflections and I, you know, in the future of this podcast, I'm [00:35:00] go, I would love to talk more about, you know, some of the other things I've done in, in courses, but I also want to hear what everyone else has been doing.

You know, teaching is not. About just how my class runs. I love hearing about how other teachers and other professors and workshop leaders, poets, writers, artists, are out there teaching people and creating community. It's one of the most important things that we could do, especially right now where everyone needs and is.

Thirsty for community, we, it is something that can help us nourish one another in a time where nourishment can be sometimes hard to, you know, hard to come by. We can do it for each other. We do not have to wait for someone to help nourish us. We can nourish ourselves and then help nourish each other. We look to you each other.

That is what I've been telling my students and reminding myself every single day. And so please [00:36:00] email writing remix podcast@gmail.com with your comments, your thoughts, your questions, your approaches. Please reach

out on Instagram. Please follow the substack. You know, you know, you'll see the links in the show notes here on the website.

And share this episode please. Um, writing Remix is a work of pure. Joy and love for me, and I hope that when you listen to this, that you get that too. I want to communicate and reach out please, because I, I, I love building this remix community. Check out all the episodes on the website. I. And, um, and if you are interested in booking me on your podcast, I'm available.

You can email me [writingremixpodcast@gmail.com](mailto:writingremixpodcast@gmail.com). If you're, um, looking for an amazing writing workshop. Um, me and my colleague and friends. [00:37:00] Stephanie Renee Payne run an unbelievable workshop called Inspired Belonging. You can reach out to us through writing remix on the, through the Gmail. Um, you'll see a link to also about the workshop.

Um, we're running them this summer. Please reach out. We could do them privately for groups, for corporate events, for anybody. Um, but yeah, reach out. Um, we wanna spread this, you know, love and spread the. Creativity and show people that there's a world that you can create and that we can create it together, interdependently, um, as interconnected beings.

And, uh, yeah, please like, subscribe and comment and I'll see you all in the next episode of Writing Remix. Thank you.