

Bonni: [00:00:00] Today on episode number 209 of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast, Asao B. Inoue shares about antiracist writing assessment ecologies.

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Bonni: [00:00:22] Hello and welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. I'm Bonni Stachowiak and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to improve our productivity approaches so we can have more peace on our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni: [00:00:49] For today's episode, I'm grateful to Nick Hengen Fox from Portland Community College, who has been on the show previously, for introducing me to today's guest Asao Inoue is professor of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, the director of the University writing and the writing center, and the program chair of the 2018 conference on College Composition and Communication. He's also been a member of the Executive Board of the Council of writing program administrators. Among his many articles and chapters on writing assessment race and racism, his article Theorizing Failure in US Writing Assessments in RTE won the 2014 CWPA Outstanding Scholarship Award. His book, which we'll be talking about today, Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing for a Socially Just Future won the 2017 and NCTE CCCC Outstanding Book Award for a monograph and the 2015 CWPA Outstanding Book Award. [laughs] And I shall be earning an award here soon for reading lots of initials. Additionally, which I'm very much looking forward to, he is completing a book on labor based grading contracts as socially just writing assessment. Asao, welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

Asao: [00:02:21] Thank you. Glad to be here.

Bonni: [00:02:23] We are tackling, you know, [sarcasm] just an easy topic. After

reading your book and many of your articles, I told you in advance I have about a thousand questions I'd like to ask you but let's start out talking a little bit about racism. Could you talk and distinguish for us when we refer to individuals as racist or when we talk about racism in a different way?

Asao: [00:02:48] Yeah. And the way I like to talk about, or the way I talk about in the book and what I talk about with teachers - racism is really a set of structures that often are invisible to us because they seem so natural. So it's not about intention or about somebody's behavior necessarily because it's something that they want or believe. Something that we might call something like prejudice. That's not the kind of racism - we certainly could talk about that - but that's not the kind of racism that I'm really dealing with in the book and in really trying to help teachers and my own university as well. We are trying to work through, figure out how do we combat, how do we eradicate, if you will, racism and the like.

Bonni: [00:03:33] So we're thinking of ourselves, instead of just *my* intent as an individual, *my* choices, behaviors as an individual... I want to be able to put on a new pair of lenses, which you do such a great job of giving us different lenses we can use, to be able to see this broader set of structures. Has this been helpful to you in the sense of then, I guess having people be less defensive? Are there other ways that it's helpful? Or any ways that it sort of hinders then our ability to make the kinds of changes we should make as individuals?

Asao: [00:04:08] Well I always like to start conversations about this, especially with teachers and such and actually in classrooms as well when I talk to students because this is a topic in all of my writing classes that I teach. I like to start with some ground rules about how we're going to go about talking and what's behind those words.

Asao: [00:04:24] So I think first of all, one thing that's really important to understand about when we talk about racism and white supremacy that there's an element in any group, no matter who you get like you randomly choose students or people together- in America there will be certain groups or people in that group that will feel very uncomfortable with this topic. And it's okay to feel uncomfortable. In fact, if you feel uncomfortable by the mention or the discussion or trying to investigate say something like racism or someone's race as a designation, then that probably means it's a healthy response in terms of thinking about how you might change or grow in that area. Like understanding. I think part of growing and maturing as a person is to find those places where you don't know something and you feel uncomfortable and then move out of

that discomfort towards some areas of comfort. But we don't want to dwell in discomfort, but we should dwell long enough to be able to figure out like why my feeling is? And where are my assumptions? And how did I get those assumptions?

Asao: [00:05:34] So it's those last two parts, the last your questions that I really want us in my classes and with with our colleagues, I want to try to investigate. And the best way to investigate that is by first having language for the structures around us that affect us, that make us do certain things. So yes. So there's so there are ground rules for it and first understanding that there is language that we need to have that help us see things in a different way. And then we work from that discomfort, knowing that we are trying to be compassionate with one another.

Bonni: [00:06:05] One of the words that struck me, I didn't even have to go past the title of your book. It was an interesting word choice and I wanted to learn more about ecology. I would have expected a different word, in my universe of reading about teaching, I would have thought maybe pedagogy or maybe teaching philosophy... Tell me more about the use of the word ecology and how that should inform our thinking about your work.

Asao: [00:06:31] Yeah, so what I hope comes through this book and in really most of my work- because my work is rooted in, while it's in the field of rhetoric and composition that I really am focused on writing assessment and racism studies. So, when I think about ecologies I don't think about the assessment itself. Like when I think about an assessment, I don't think about the portfolio or the essay or the points system; I think in much larger terms. And I had to come to this over a decade or so of my thinking.

Asao: [00:07:05] It started with looking at some of the literature on technology, assessment as technology. This came out of large scale assessment discussions and validity studies. And I just moved those, all I saw were applications to the classroom. Right? So these are talking about placements, and SATS and things like. What I was really thinking was this is a lot of things to offer a writing teacher or any teacher who's who always is managing this technology of assessment, whatever that looks like in their classroom be it pointer letters or checks and minuses or whatever.

Asao: [00:07:41] And so after talking with some folks in the field and getting some really good ideas and some good feed back on this from some initial work done around assessment as technology, I realized there was much more

organic in which I was really thinking or should be thinking. And that's where ecology came from and I liked the research around ecologies as complex systems that more in each element, it's more than, its parts. It's more than the sum of its parts, which I think is a very adequate way to describe a classroom. We can teach the same class in two different hours of the day and with the same exact lesson plan or the same thing and get two very different results. And that's because these are very complex systems that we can do in almost exactly the same thing, or try to and we, one, aren't doing exactly the same thing. And it's not the same ecology because they're different people involved, different time of day and place and so forth .

Asao: [00:08:33] So, to me, ecology helps me keep things very fluid. It helps me understand that much larger set of things that I'm trying to keep in mind when I design or when I try to understand assessment and what its effects on students.

Bonni: [00:08:49] I really think it's a beautiful choice of words. I don't know if this is taking it too far, but it reminds me that in ecologies it's very hard to see cause and effect because as you said everything is interdependent. And I think specifically as we think about grading, you go around and if you're early and you haven't done very much grading, you might go around and talk to different people about how they address certain topics. But that's kind of a dangerous game to do that if you haven't thought through your own teaching ecology because these things all are interdependent and that our actions are choices in one area wouldn't necessarily be as simple as that that will drive better writing or that will create more discipline or what have you.

Asao: [00:09:36] Yeah I think that term or that idea of thinking about assessment as an ecology helped me get past the cause and effect thing. And that was really started for me as as as a teacher, it started out as relieving the guilt of not accomplishing what I thought I tried to design into my class. When it might work a little bit here but not so much the next day or the next year. And I think we certainly need to be responsible for what we do in the classroom as teachers. At the same time, classrooms are ecologies that are very complex.

Bonni: [00:10:12] I know you have lots of ideas for us on how we can do better. But let's define the problem a little bit more. In what ways is racism embedded- and by racism as a reminder to people we're talking about the systems and structures that are inherently racist. How is that embedded into how most of us assess students work or how most of us consider grading?

Asao: [00:10:33] In a number of ways. We all come from and work in hegemonic

systems- systems that are established and have particular biases or determined effects. So that means that if you got to where you are as a teacher today you came out of white supremacist systems. You have those biases, even if your politics and your desires and your impulses are to not be that. And that I think- and I don't think that anyone is a bad person. I'm saying that what we have are bad systems. Right.

Asao: [00:11:07] So one of the things that I focus on a lot now is white language supremacy, which comes out of that dominant code, that dominant standardized edited American English which we end up using as a default to say this is the standard, students have to meet this. It becomes the standard in the classroom by which we give grades or assign credit to writing and communication practices. And that perpetuates the racism that I started trying to think about in this book and that I continued to think about in terms of white language supremacy, in classrooms and in society at large.

Asao: [00:11:43] So it is the structures that create that language and the structures that train teachers and prospective teachers to become teachers and then to perpetuate those and in some ways, many of us we've painted ourselves into a corner. Those are the dispositions that we have. So what other standards are there? Well I'm saying that's the question we ask, not to find a new standard but to see the variety of standards that we have. To see, oh there's not one standard, there's many standards that we have and understanding them sitting next to each other in a classroom is perhaps a more anti-racist way to go about thinking about feedback in classrooms and how assessment, what kinds of judgments and assessments circulate in the classroom. So, for me, it often starts with that standard. How do we get past using a standard against students?

Bonni: [00:12:40] And do we want to help our students then become more familiar with all the different kinds of standards there are? I mean, as you're talking I'm thinking about having students read academic journals because if you want to get published in an academic journal, then you're probably going to need to learn to write that way. Or learning how to write in more of a web friendly blogger type of voice- I mean is that part of it? Is helping to see that there is no one right way to write?

Asao: [00:13:09] Yeah I mean there are certainly disciplinary differences and we can talk about those or we can talk about cultural and linguistic differences that come from groups of people. The bottom line is language moves with people. If people aren't using a language, then it is not going to change and evolve.

Right, it's not going to even exist.

Asao: [00:13:27] And so knowing this simple fact helps us understand why, in academia, certain folks in humanities, or in religious studies, or in history, or in engineering, write the way they do and communicate the way they do. And I don't know if I want to necessarily purposefully inflict one kind onto all of my students. I know the statistics nationally, ninety percent of my students will not be academics. That's not the kind of communication practice they need to work on. And I don't think we should be. Right. I think it should be all the wonderful different things that we have in the world already.

Asao: [00:14:01] So I think it's important to investigate initially. And I do this in all my classes especially that first year writing class to find out exactly what are your goals for communicating? And maybe it is to learn the dominant code. Maybe there is a student that wants to be a graduate student or they aspire that they want to try this out. College is what that's about.

Asao: [00:14:19] So, could we experience other codes, other kinds of Englishes in the classroom? Absolutely, absolutely. But perhaps more importantly it might be first prudent for us to investigate our own dispositions, and habitus - our own ways with language. And then try to see how they match up to a dominant code that we might see in a published text that's pretty archetypal or my own text, me as a teacher, who has who takes on much of that dominant code. But in an atmosphere or in an ecology that doesn't punish a student for not mimicking the dominate code.

Asao: [00:14:59] Now that's not to say that learning the dominant code isn't an option for students, if that is their choice in this atmosphere to do the learning and thinking they want. Absolutely. But they really need to know the real choice. I think. That is and what the consequences of all those choices are. And there's lots of consequences, especially for students of color, multilingual students, students from different cultures than the mainstream culture in which the dominant code comes out of that standard of English.

Bonni: [00:15:28] One of the things that you wrote about is that some of the ways that we're gauging our students writing is really- well and especially this active judgment that it is racism in disguise and you wrote "We call it laziness, personal choices or just the way things are." And I guess the laziness really struck me. And actually they all really me. It really does seem to come down to you know wanting to place that label of you don't write correctly. And you don't write correctly in this way is you don't write like a white person.

Asao: [00:16:03] Yeah I like to talk to my students about first we will get some examples of past kinds of feedback, not the actual feedback but the kind of feedback they've gotten on their writing in school, like in high school or in college. Then I ask them what exactly is that teacher looking for? Maybe they had a rubric, maybe they had a set of expectations, but what are they really looking for? And my argument is most teachers if they've not thought about their practices of judgment very carefully, then what they're really looking for is themselves. They're looking some version of themselves because that's what they know. Just like when we assign personal experience essays or we ask students to write from their own experience, then we're saying you know yourself. That's your strong suit, write from that.

Asao: [00:16:50] I say most teachers have not been trained to think about how to do judgment, how to do assessment in a classroom then they're going to work from what their strongest suit is naturally which is I know it when I see it, I know good writing when I see it because I can understand it and it's clear to me. But we should always be adding to me to everything all over judgment. This was clear TO ME. This was unclear TO ME. And this is preferable TO ME but it may or may not be.

Asao: [00:17:17] Certainly there are patterns in groups, discipline wise and in terms of cultural groups and racial groups. But I'm talking about those patterns in a sort of individualized way. So I know that my initial training when I started as a writing teacher didn't give me any training in assessment or judgment. How does it work? What is it? What does the brain do when it makes judgments? When I read text exactly what is happening and why do I get to where I get? And that's really an important set of questions that a teacher can ask all on their own with their students. I want to ask those questions with my students so I like to bring in a little heuristic around the habits of white discourse in my class.

Asao: [00:18:00] And this is a heuristic that my students and I over a couple of years created by looking at the literature on whiteness and some rhetorical literature. And then we built this and we apply it as a sort of rubric if you will or a heuristic to help us read. It gives us language and a lens to read stuff, our own judgments. Read my judgments on their papers. Read the way in which a text has been written. All those things.

Asao: [00:18:25] And then, pose some questions about that about what we're noticing in those around these habits that tend to be the habits of white discourse. We'll find it is pretty uniform and we find that no matter who you are

or where you come from, if you're in the university, you hold some of these habits. No matter what your skin color is or where you come from. Because if you didn't, you wouldn't be able to be here.

Bonni: [00:18:49] What are some of the habits?

Asao: [00:18:51] Well so the first one which I think is a really overarching habit. It's a naturalized orientation to the world that says what is reachable for me, is reachable for anyone. So it's a very visual and a very sort of proximity metaphor but it comes out in a lot of ways in the judgment of all essays. It's like saying this sentence, your thesis isn't clear. It's not stated clearly. When I think, I doubt any serious students would write a sentence, especially a thesis sentence that they didn't think was clear to them, at least initially. There might be ways of tweaking it but that's not what they said I'm going to write an unclear sentence, or unclear thesis.

Asao: [00:19:33] No, they probably wrote a clear one to them. But this other reader and this teacher or judge doesn't find that clear and the clarity, how that needs a change for that reader, seems very reachable to them. And this can also be said for when we step out of the classroom just a little bit and think about the pattern, the history of a student, of the good students, right... the one who gets good grades, the one who can match the code. What likely has happened is that most of that history along the way, those good grades, those A's and those B pluses or whatever the good grades are have always been within reach. And there's reasons why they've been in reach. They happen to fit the dispositions, the other dispositions that match the code they've been looking for, that their teachers are looking for.

Asao: [00:20:18] So of course they were going to a class and go this is very easy. I can do this. So in a class, like in my courses that are based on how much labor you do. That's how we determine the grade, the final course grade. These kinds of students often voice resistances in the beginning because it sounds like because this is true because there were quite astoot this way, that they have to do more work now than there were they previously had to do. They are like all they have to do is this and this. You know they do the 24 hour essay, right. 24 hours before, they bang out the essay, because they can because they've always been rewarded for doing the same stuff that's within reach. And then they're done, so they don't to give a lot of thought.

Asao: [00:20:57] But in my class, there is labor. We map it by minute and by words written and by tasks done. And that, they're going to clearly see I can't

write the way I've been writing before. And I'm saying that's good for everybody. What's good for this group of students is good for this group of students, it doesn't matter where you are on any sort of illusory scale. What matters is that the engine of learning is labor. It's doing work. So the most and least I can ask of students is their time and that all that equates oftentimes very closely to labor.

Asao: [00:21:37] And that's the center, for me, the center of an anti-racist and writing assessment ecology is figuring out how to get away from that standard, and in my case, move towards using labor in ways that will help us get the institutional mandated course grade. If I could get away with no grades, I would not be raised at all. But I can't just yet. So I have to have grades.

Bonni: [00:22:00] Could you talk a little bit about a student. It could be fictitious or one that you recall that had different goals than one might normally have in their writing? And then what this labor based contract looked like in their case? And maybe what a week might look like or a couple of weeks?

Asao: [00:22:19] Yeah. I've had students who have, and again, while I'm thinking of one in particular and this really is a version of several other students. I've had students who really once we looked at some alternative discourses, ones there are other kinds of Englishes that are not the standardized one that you would expect to find in a writing class as the model that we're reading together and talking about. In this case, it happened to be an African-American student. We were looking at an African-American text written in African-American English. And the writer was making an academic argument, but doing it in African-American English and really responding to essentially standards. Right.

Asao: [00:22:55] So this really was a poignant for the students, seeing this and thinking about oh I don't have it right this way. So while he had goals in the beginning that he had expressed, I want to be able to do this and this and this all around academic incorporating research and sources into his text. And being more confident in his writing and caring more about his writing, he expressed to us, the class, on many occasions how especially in high school, he just couldn't care about his writing and English classes because of what they wanted him to do, it was difficult for them to do that. And I see why. He wasn't rewarded. Why would you want it? What what person in their right mind would want to keep doing an activity that they never are rewarded for? Or that they are often punished for? Nobody wants to do that. There's a self-preservation there that is really important to your own psyche, of course. You try to avoid it or you create all these mechanisms in yourself, in your practice to avoid that punishment.

Asao: [00:23:58] So, once he saw this and saw this validated in a printed text by a professor, an African-American professor who was doing it in African-American English in an academic way and winning the argument. Right. His work started to change. He didn't change his expressed goals. But to me, it's clear that he was changing them along the way, they were organically changing. And our classroom allowed him to change those goals organically along the way because our goals, mostly for the class itself, to get of course grade, to progress in the course were based around labor. He just changed his practices within his labor, to write in slightly different ways, to say "I think I'm okay with writing this I'm not going to be afraid to do this. I could do this."

Asao: [00:24:41] So he would have these interesting defense mechanisms and I think he would say this about his own writing. He would say "I'm going to get up at 5am and I'll do the work then." And our class was at 8am. So now he would do the work. But of course, it was a very short time. Doesn't give him a lot of time to think. He's got to get to bed early, he's going to get up at 5 o'clock and do his work. So you can see how this is a defense mechanism because it's just, it's a painful thing to sit down and try to use writing or do some reading. And it's not painful because it was necessarily hard for him. It was painful because it is difficult to get out of that nosedive when this assessment ecologies that you have experienced have only hurt you. Even when you're in a good one, one that doesn't do those same practices, it's difficult to see it.

Asao: [00:25:28] I know this firsthand from my own experience as a student in public schools in Las Vegas and in college in Oregon. That was much of my experience earlier and I'm only blessed with a disposition that I love language.

Bonni: [00:25:43] So what would his labor look like then? If not waking up at 5 to have it done by 8, tell me about a week in his...

Asao: [00:25:52] Well, it's a slow process. So as much of his labor was still done in the in the mornings. However, there was some change in how it went, at what time of day. That was the biggest change was he sprinkled his time more often throughout the day and he ate when he did his work. He found that eating something while he read or was doing writing, it helped- it gave him some- I don't know if it was that he was not getting regular meals or if it was just that he wasn't thinking, he was too busy in his head thinking "oh I got to do this writing." But instead he sort of took care of the needs of the body, if you will. But most of his changes were substantive, whereas the subject of being engaged with the writing more so. So he made his hours that he did, while there a little bit more,

about 50 percent more, they were more meaningful to him. I think that's a big step.

Asao: [00:26:51] When none of his labours I would say at least from his opening narrative to us about is writing in English classes. None of them were rewarding. He consciously tried to avoid it. Yes.

Bonni: [00:27:02] A problematic word when talking about students grades is this idea of "earning" a grade. Do you still use that language to say like, how would I earn an A in your class? Or is there another word that you use to describe the labor I'm going to go through to get to that A?

Asao: [00:27:20] Yeah, I don't use "earn" - I used to when I put grades on papers and I assign points of stuff. And I had very elaborate systems. But of course, as you might guess, I found problems with that, deep, deep problems that I didn't justify ethically anymore.

Asao: [00:27:37] I don't use the language of earning because it makes it sound like most of the work of assessment, that is the way that grade is produced on a paper comes from the student. When I think actually it's more like 30 30 30 something. A third of the grade is produced by what the writer ends up putting on the paper, if we're talking about an essay. A third of it comes from the context in the classroom, that ecology that in which whatever has happened around that paper, whether it was scaffoldings of the paper or whether it was other peer feedback or whatever it was or something else in a student's life that might affect what's on the paper.

Asao: [00:28:14] Or what's in a teacher's life. For instance, if I'm really really tired and I have a stack of papers to read, I'm probably not going to be as good of a grader or an evaluator as I would if I was fully rested and well-fed and so forth. And those, we can't deny our bodies, we are embodied teachers and students. So a third of that comes from that context on both ends.

Asao: [00:28:37] And then a third of it comes from the dispositions of the teacher. So really most of the way though it's that grade is produced is not earned per se. It's given. So I moved from the language of earning to the language giving which in one sense feels a little nicer to me. I know that some people don't think that because they think, "Oh well I'm not determining your grade." Wait, no you are. That's how judgement works. You decide the grade. But in my labor based classrooms, it's more about the grade we agree upon. If you do this labor, and we agree upon that, we negotiate those terms in the first couple of weeks of

class. Then I assign that grade. So it's the grade I assign and it's all on our little table in our labor based grading contract. My language is more towards language around labor and assigning it and negotiating the terms of that assignment. So I'm more of an administrator of a contract than anything else.

Bonni: [00:29:34] You talk about grading as being a way of promoting social justice and equality. And we've defined sort of the problem with racism, the problem with our standard approaches to grading and assessment. And you've introduced us to labor based grading contracts. And for people who want to learn more, I'll have plenty of follow up articles and links to your work in the show notes. But what are some other ways we might consider using the processes of assessment to promote greater social justice?

Asao: [00:30:08] In the classroom, I think part of fairness- if we're going to step out of the language of social justice and anti-racism and use an equivalent, partially equivalent term, fairness. If we want to have fair systems, fair to everybody, I think what's really really important to that is participation. So, if we think about all the systems that judge and assess us, that make decisions about us as people in our lives, the ones that seemed the most fair to an individual are the ones that that individual has had some say in or some way to get input in the process in which that decision was made or in the values or expectations that went into making the decisions by some group or some person or making the decision themselves.

Asao: [00:30:54] So I think students have to be involved in the assessment ecology always. Whether that means- and in my classrooms, we negotiate, we develop together and negotiate all rubrics that are used to determine like what do we want to do in this assignment? We determine the flow of the labor constantly. So if I'm assigned to labor, we negotiate that because like you know who knows. One quarter, for instance, I had a class where everybody worked almost full time. And I assigned quite a bit of stuff on the weekends and that was becoming problematic. They were working all weekend and just didn't have enough time to get stuff. So we changed the due dates on the recurring assignments and we changed the amount of hours of labor that I was expecting each week in that class as a response to their own reflections and our discussions in class around that.

Asao: [00:31:46] So students need to be involved in that ecology quite intimately and they need to be able to negotiate the terms of the very important benefit that all of them are therefore in many ways, even though it's not really the thing that they're there for and that's their course grade. So we negotiate our grading

contract, that's how we determine the course grade. And they have to feel good about it and then we get to it at that point. So we look to get it we don't say is this still fair? And we reflect on it, think about it and then if we do change any details or redefine some things, we do that. And I'd say about 70 percent of time, we do adjust the contracts a little bit each quarter.

Bonni: [00:32:24] I'm going to read just a little bit from Page 24 from your book and then see if you want to comment to them and then we will need to go on to the recommendation segment. This is a quote again from page 24. "Any denial of racism in our writing assessments is a white illusion. It upholds a white hegemonic set of power relations that is the status quo. It's the imagination of those too invested in white racial habits regardless of their racial affiliation." And then this is the part I mostly wanted to get to but not out of context. "Hell, I denied it when I was younger I had to. I would have eaten me alive and I likely would not have been able to do what I do today if I hadn't."

Asao: [00:33:04] Yeah, if I knew what I do now. Well, what I'm referring to there is my own history in schools around the judgment of my language. So I grew up in North Las Vegas which was an African-American ghetto. It was a separate city from Vegas that was created by redlining practices in Vegas where hotels and businesses didn't want African Americans living in Bay Las Vegas proper. So they they basically moved into this area that at the time was outside of Vegas but now it's kind of swallowed everything up but it has its own I think Mayor and fire department and police and everything. It is North Las Vegas. But there, in poor schools in growing up speaking and using African-American English primarily, initially, of course I'm not rewarded for that in school.

Asao: [00:33:52] And I took on the sense that I - you know when you live in the ghetto and you're poor and at seven you know how much money your mom makes because you know when it runs out in the month, when you know that at seven and you have to know that, you find all kinds of ways just to getting the hell out of the ghetto and staying out. It wasn't until deep into my 30s that I released a lot of the burden of feeling like tomorrow I could slip right back there, I could be poor like like grinding poor like we were when I was younger.

Asao: [00:34:27] And part of that made me feel that I needed to take on, I needed to be white. I thought that this was the thing. I wouldn't have said white, exactly. Maybe in my private moments alone I would. But in school, I would have said I need to know the standard, I need to get good grades. I need to chase after this. I need to be just like my teachers. And I think that because of that I lost some things. I lost a lot of the kind of ways in which I used language

then. I didn't lose all of it really, but a lot of it. And I think I didn't understand and I couldn't understand what schools and what grading systems were really doing to me and how they made me into a grade chaser and care about grades even though I would turn around and say I don't care about what my teacher thinks about my writing because I used it as a defense mechanism, I knew what I was going to get.

Asao: [00:35:18] So that was the that reference I had because it was I was referring to sort of defense mechanisms that I had growing up, growing on at a particular time in a particular place. I think I was lucky that I had a twin brother whom I've always loved who's always loved me. I remember many times growing up thinking out loud to my brother. It is us against the world. And that's not the motto of my sons. My sons now, who are now are 20 and 17, do not have that motto. They don't need to have it. They're born with more privilege and more comfort than I ever was. And I don't think that's a bad thing. But I also think that in many ways the irony, the contradiction here is if I didn't have those circumstances, if I didn't have a language that I had early on, I wouldn't have been so compelled to change it and I wouldn't probably have been able to move up in the educational ladders that I did.

Asao: [00:36:13] It was, in my in my case, the keys to the kingdom. At the same time, I will say that for other folks who don't share as many privileges that I have, I may have spoken African-American English but I was not African-American. So there's a big difference, I think. And so therefore, that was more of a key to the kingdom than my African-American friends or my Latino or Latina friends that if that those keys would not work nearly as many doors, I think or as easily.

Asao: [00:36:44] So that that's something I have to... That's the stuff I got to always be investigating or be interrogating like I have some privileges too as much as I have had some struggles and I don't have some white skin privilege but I do have other privileges that are related to that.

Bonni: [00:37:00] We could keep doing this, but unfortunately we have to try to stick to people's commute time so I'm going to move on to the recommendations. Thank you so much for sharing that part of your story it was very powerful.

Asao: [00:37:11] My pleasure.

Bonni: [00:37:11] Well The recommendation I have for today is actually a book I finished a couple of months ago. But I thought it was worth mentioning in the

show and it's called *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* and it's by Timothy Snyder. And I'm just going to read the description from the book because it does a better job than I will.

Bonni: [00:37:30] "The founding fathers tried to protect us from the threat they knew, that tyranny that overcame ancient democracy. Today our political order faces new threats not unlike the totalitarianism of the 20th century. We are no wiser than the Europeans who saw democracy yield to fascism, Nazism or communism. One advantage is that we might learn from their experience."

Bonni: [00:37:55] This is a very short read. I think it's about 120 pages and he just goes through and takes history and some of the what should have been warning signs for us being on our way toward having democracy at risk. And one of the things he talks about is that we- and I certainly felt this in my own paradigm- that we tend to have this feeling that we're just always moving in the direction of democracy. That yeah we may have a step back or two but we're just always moving in that direction and that that's a very dangerous paradigm for us to have. That is not an inevitable course of action. And it was a deep read, I'll tell you a challenged to me. It was not always just completely entertained as I flipped every page. I had to think very hard and really try to absorb it, but it was an important read and it's also short, so we make our brains work little bit harder and then we can take a deep breath and be more informed by history.

Bonni: [00:38:51] He talks a lot about just the importance of knowing history and especially for young people today that just being so important. I keep talking about that what we're experiencing today is not normal and yet I don't think I probably tie it back as much to history as I really could. And his book would be a great source for anyone trying to do that better. And pass it over to you now to make a recommendation or two.

Asao: [00:39:14] Yeah I can make two recommendations. One is a book series which is really a series of novellas that I recently read and found and just really enjoying that pretty fast reads. The other is maybe a suggestion about a kind of daily practice.

Asao: [00:39:28] So the novellas I recently read are from Nnedi Okorafor and they are the *Binti* series. *Binti* is the female protagonist, it runs through all three of the novels or novellas. And this is sort of a speculative fiction sci-fi kind of series and it's just a really- what I like about this is that the central character is an interesting, strong and deeply flawed but also beautifully painted female hero.

Right. And unlikely in many ways. And it's also about her own coming to understand herself as this tribal African intergalactic university student. So it's fascinating that way. So in the person of the first novella is her journey to this intergalactic University and the next one is going home and so forth. So it's really interesting.

Asao: [00:40:23] And in discussion with others who read it, so many interesting parallels come out in terms of how students of color or multilingual students experience university life today.

Asao: [00:40:39] The other thing I'll suggest, that was kind of fun but it's also somewhat intellectual. This one is maybe something for good living. I guess, this is what I've got. It's just a very short small practice. Pause and notice what you do. That's it. I mean a three second pause. What I'm getting at is, I think we do better in our lives when we can enjoy what we do as we do it and not always run after the goal. It's great to win the race. But winning the race and standing on the podium is literally two minutes. Most of your experiences is the experience of running the race and training for it and that's most of it. So enjoy the process.

Asao: [00:41:20] So like when I think about writing books or when I think about doing research projects or when I think about teaching a class what about preparing for class, I often will pause and think isn't it great that I get to do this, this thing right here. I have time and get do this. I get to read this person's writing, they wrote this for me to read and give them some feedback. It sounds very goofy and simple but it's really a mindful practice that I think is so important because I think we're often very busy, especially in academia. We don't take enough time to just pause for three seconds. And I mean frequently, like maybe once every two hours in a day or hour and go oh, I'm doing this thing right now. OK I'm doing this thing. That's good. It's good to do this thing. So that's it.

Bonni: [00:42:11] Oh I love that. I love that. Thank you so much for those recommendations. And also for coming on the show and talking to us about your work. And there's so much more I feel like we could talk about, so maybe this is my nudge to say would you come back again and talk some more?

Asao: [00:42:25] Sure. It's Been a lot of fun. Thank you very inviting me.

Bonni: [00:42:27] I know you have another book coming out in the future too, so maybe we can get you back to talk about that one as well.

Asao: [00:42:32] Yes for sure.

Bonni: [00:42:36] Thanks once again to Asao Inoue for joining me on today's episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. If you'd like to get to the show notes for today's episode, you can navigate over to teachinginhigher ed.com/209. If You don't want to have to remember to do that every time, you can get them right in your inbox once a week along with an article that I write about teaching or productivity. You can subscribe at teachinginhighered.com/subscribe. Thanks so much for listening and for all the work that you do to continue to become more effective at facilitating learning. I'll see you next time.

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