



Deconstructing High School English

An interview with Dr. Matthew Kim, Chair, English and Reading Departments.

Sue Cranford, Associate Director of Admission

It is my pleasure to welcome Dr. Matthew Kim to my podcast today. Dr. Kim is a teacher and also chair of our English and Reading departments here at Eagle Hill. In addition, he is an alum of Eagle Hill School. He graduated in 1997 and then went on to graduate from Illinois State University in 2014, earning a PhD in English Studies in 2017. His edited collection, *Writing Studio, Pedagogy, Space, Place, and Rhetoric and Collaborative Environments* was nominated for Book of the Year by the International Writing Centers Association. Dr. Kim travels across the United States and Europe with his students, guiding them to write and present their original rhetorical and literary analyses at academic conferences. He is an academic advisor and a beloved member of our faculty, and I know that you will enjoy listening to this conversation.

Dr. Matthew Kim, it is such a pleasure to have you here with me in the admission office today. I know that our families and prospective parents who are listening are going to really enjoy hearing what you say, because no matter what you're talking about, you are always interesting and brilliant.

Dr. Matthew Kim, Chair, English and Reading Departments

Thank you, Sue.

Sue Cranford

The title of our podcast today is **Deconstructing High School English**. And when I was thinking about this podcast, I was working with a family whose child really had a very negative relationship with reading, with writing, and with literacy in general. And this family was asking me, how do you approach working with students who might have had negative experiences?

Matthew Kim

First of all, thank you so much for having me. I've always wanted to do a podcast with you. I could not think of a topic that I am more interested in and more passionate about than teaching English. I'm 43, and it's been my life's work well, it's been my work as an adult since I was in my early 20s. My whole life

revolves around teaching literature and reading and writing to students. I remember that when I was younger, and by younger, I really mean like, grade school age and even into junior high. I hated reading. I knew how to read. I could read. I could not write well. And I was told certainly by my public-school teachers that I was a bad writer.

How did I become a reader and the writer is a really important part, I think, of this podcast, which is I had great literacy sponsors. And literacy sponsor is not a word that I or a term that I coined. I mean, it's a term that Deborah Brandt, who's a literacy guru at the University of Wisconsin Madison, coined close to thirty years ago. And a literacy sponsor is simply a person. It could be a teacher; it could be a family member, it could be a friend, who advocates for a student's reading and writing and making and designing. It's somebody who promotes literate activity all the time to people who otherwise would not want to take up literate activities.

I had so many literacy sponsors here at Eagle Hill as a student. I had literacy sponsors all through college, and so I learned how to be one myself. And then when it came time for me to choose my career, I was like, I'm going to be a literacy sponsor.

Sue Cranford

That's incredible. And I have to say that I was an English teacher for fifteen years, which I know I've shared with you prior to working in admission. I was teaching in more traditional schools. And when I think back to how those English departments were built and how different it is today. What we do here, and how you built the English department here, and we would teach the five paragraph, critical, analytical essay. That's how I was sort of trained as a high school English teacher, which I look back on and think, that was all wrong.

Matthew Kim

And this ties right into my philosophy that I hope that I bring to every student that comes into our school that the most important things that we can teach our students about writing are, first of all, to familiarize yourself with a composing process that works for you, that is so important. There is not one way to write a paper. There just simply isn't. And anyone who says to a student that there's only one way, their own way, to write a paper is just mistaken. It's misguided.

There are a lot of moving parts to a composing process, right? There's the invention part, which is what most of us call brainstorming. You have to invent the idea about which you want to write, and then you have to draft the idea, and then, of course, you have to revise the idea. And writing is a recursive process, not a step by step.

That leads me to say a couple of other things that I think are very important for our listeners to know about our writing program at Eagle Hill. Of course, it's important for our students to have composing

processes with which they are comfortable, and we want that. And they certainly in our six-term writing classes, they learn how to write from having no ideas to some ideas to the best ideas.

Sue Cranford

Okay, right.

Matthew Kim

I think that's a really important thing to talk about.

Sue Cranford

Let's make it even more real for our listeners. You mentioned a couple of things people might not understand. You mentioned that our writing classes are six-terms. Essentially, we have a nine-term schedule, which we don't need to go into right now, but six-terms equals six months.

Matthew Kim

It does.

Sue Cranford

So, we separate literature and writing, and we're talking about writing right now. Can you give our listeners just some examples of some of the six-term classes that students have taken that will illustrate a little bit of that inventing process, that recursive process that you're discussing, just to make it a little bit more real for them.

Matthew Kim

Every year I create with my department. Certainly, I am not a one-person show. I have fifteen teachers in my department and if you ask me, I'm biased. It's the best department on campus. Every department probably says they're the best department. But we come together as a department, and we create classes that we think that students will find interesting.

We have themed writing courses and themed literature courses. And so, regarding the writing class no matter which theme you sign up for whether it's writing, current events, political writing, eco writing, mystery writing, we have a variety of writing courses that our students can choose from each year. Now we have six-term writing courses.

For lack of a better word. I call those fundamental courses. They're fundamental in that the objectives of the writing courses are the same even though the themes are different. The objectives aren't the same for each student, but we have larger objectives, such as I want every student who graduates from Eagle Hill

School to know that writing shapes our identities and beliefs. I want every student who graduates from Eagle Hill School to know that writing is a knowledge making activity meaning we come to know what we know when we're able to articulate ourselves in writing.

I want every student who graduates from Eagle Hill School to know that revision is always necessary. Whether you're a student or a teacher or an attorney or a medical doctor your writing must always be revised. And I think probably the most important objective of our six-term writing classes is for students to walk away knowing that writing is a lifelong process. Writing is not something that only authors do. It's not something that only English teachers do. It's something that everybody does because there are so many careers that have writing as a major part of the job. This is why it's so important. And we do this in Eagle headline we do it very well is we start to teach students that writing in different genres is an important skill. So, research papers in English, lab reports and science and historical papers in history and all the rest.

Sue Cranford

Now when families look at Eagle Hill, they realize that not only do we have an English department, but we have a reading department. You happen to be chair of both of these departments and very invested in both of these. And I want you to talk a little bit about perhaps first the difference between what our reading department does and our literature, you want to say, teachers, what the difference is between those two.

Matthew Kim

Yes. And there are some major differences. Let me start by saying that between the two departments Reading and English. Of course, our overall goal is to support our students in their quest to become literate citizens. And this is something that is very serious to me is probably one of the most serious things that I think about every day. Since we're already on the topic of English. Let's switch from writing to literature. So, we offer five literature classes a year.

Sue Cranford

We do the six writing classes and the five literature classes.

Matthew Kim

Yes, we have three, what I call fundamental writing classes. Those are the ones with the themes. Those are six-terms. Then we have writing electives, and those are three-terms. That's food *writing*, that's *classic film to text*, *who's the goat sports journalism*, *arts and entertainment journalism*, things like that.

And then our literature classes, I think it is so important, Sue, for every single student who graduates from our school to have an introduction to literature that is both classic and contemporary and even

experimental. So, when you graduate from Eagle Hill School, you have read Shakespeare and Toni Morrison. You've read Wordsworth and Coleridge and Whitman and Poe. But you've also read Murakami and George Saunders and Virginia Wolf and William Burroughs. Our students have had exposure.

Everything is essential about literature and writing. When they go to college, they can be proud of themselves when they walk into their freshman composition class and the professor says, today we're going to read *Hamlet* or we're going to read *Sula* by Toni Morrison, or we're going to read *The Sound and the Fury* by Ray Bradbury. They can say, more often than not, I read that.

Sue Cranford

And don't you find they are more invested in taking a course when they have a choice?

Matthew Kim

Yeah, it's very empowering to have choices in your curriculum. And I can tell you that there are not a lot of high schools in the United States that often they're taking things like English Ten or Junior English, American Literature, and British Literature. And so, our students are getting to pick their own courses based on their interests.

Sue Cranford

What happens if a student comes in and again, we're still talking about English, but what happens if the student has more developed writing skills in comparison to their reading and their ability to make inferences, to draw inferences from text? How does our approach really allow us to meet the student, where the student is in both of those areas?

Matthew Kim

For me, I think the takeaway is always that our classes are handcrafted for each student, and their needs and interests and their needs vary. I think that is such an important takeaway. We're ready to work with strong readers and writers. We're ready to work with struggling readers and writers.

And also, I think this is very vital in our department, and I'm sure throughout our whole school, but specifically in our department, we never tell a student that they are a bad writer. I cannot tell you how many times I have been told by students, and as I said, at the beginning of our podcast, I myself have been told this we are bad writers.

There is no such thing as a bad writer. When your child comes to school at Eagle Hill and learns with us, they will not be called a bad writer.

I always say inexperienced writers, new writers. I'll tell you; words matter. Telling someone that they're a new writer gives hope. An inexperienced writer gives hope. One of my main focuses in being a chair is to create an environment of hope.

Sue Cranford

So, let's talk a little bit about reading as a discrete entity. You can correct me if I'm wrong, but I think about one third of our students take a class in the reading department. And this would be a student like my daughter, who was diagnosed with dyslexia. She happened to be very fluent. She had had a lot of Orton Gillingham, but she was very low with her comprehension. That's what she worked really hard on here and obviously made a huge progress.

Tell us about the reading department and a bit about the teachers. I'm certain that you hire a little bit differently for the reading department than you do for the English department.

Matthew Kim

We do, but not much differently. Let me explain what I mean. So, our reading department is smaller than our English department. We have five full time reading teachers where we have fifteen full time English teachers. These reading teachers that we have, myself included in this, are trained in a mixed methods approach to reading. We work with Orton Gillingham, which is phonics based, that's sound and Structured Word Inquiry, which is morphine based or based on words on roots and affixes.

Each of our teachers are prepared to work with all of our students in the reading department in a variety of ways. But specifically, we will work with students in learning to read through a phonics method and through a morphological method that is very important. Along with our reading tutorial class, which is sometimes it's one on one and one to two.

Sue Cranford

And those would actually be eight or nine-terms.

Matthew Kim

Yes, those are eight or nine-terms. They are full year classes. We also have reading comprehension. We have reading fluency. We have reading for academic purposes, close reading strategies for fiction, word attack skills, novella, short story masterpieces. It's important for me to share this. These departments are different, but they work in conjunction with one another. They are different, but our goals are the same, which is to create literate citizens.

If you are going to graduate from Eagle Hill School, you are reading and you are writing with confidence. It is my charge, and I take this very seriously, that each student that walks across that stage with a high school diploma in their hand is a reader and a writer.

Sue Cranford

That's wonderful. Now let's talk about a student that you have seen from the beginning and then walking across that stage. And what kind of transformation did you witness in that student?

Matthew Kim

One of my favorite stories, and I probably tell this a couple of times a year because it's so impactful to me, it still is. I had a student and I probably had him in my writing course. It was his freshman year, and I asked them to write on a general topic. And he became so emotional, he started shaking and tears were rolling down his face. And I had never seen that happen before. And I was alarmed, and I think he was alarmed. And so, he excused himself and came back and we had this conversation.

He had one of the most severe cases of writers apprehension that I have even to this day, witnessed. And I'll tell you, I think what got him writing was that we went slowly. We started sentence starter and word association games. I say school, you say whatever it is that you say. We start off with very low stakes assignments. And I want you to know that the rest of the class were doing other writing assignments. So sometimes, even when our classes are only five or six students, we can still break that apart into distinct groups, different classes, we can differentiate.

And I'll never forget fall family weekend when I presented to his parents two paragraphs. I was so nervous. I was like, I'm going to show them that their son in one month has written two paragraphs. Oh, my God, I'm going to get fired. This is horrible. And they were overjoyed. He went on to St. Michael's. He got a bachelor's degree in history, and last time I spoke to him, he was getting a master's in museum studies in New York City.

Sue Cranford

That was amazing how much help he received from you. You were a true literacy sponsor in his life. And actually, if he hadn't come to Eagle Hill, maybe he wouldn't really be doing what he's doing.

Matthew Kim

I think that's right. I bet that if you ask, certainly as an alum myself, I will tell you that if it were not for Eagle Hill and my own literacy sponsors here, I certainly wouldn't have had the courage to go to college and be here. And I bet most students would tell you with pride that they came here. They found literacy sponsors also encouraged them to do well in all areas.

And I don't think we're underestimating here. I don't think that we're overinflating the importance here of having a strong literacy sponsor. In fact, I really can't emphasize it enough. At Eagle Hill, your child is going to have the best teachers.

Sue Cranford

Correct. And they're going to be their best selves. I think of a student that comes to mind, and I remember she came here, and her executive function skills were just absolutely horrific. By 11th grade, she was actually doing International Baccalaureate full time, which is the highest sort of like, challenging level you can do. And she went off to Wellesley College. And I remember her telling me, I never thought this would ever be possible for me. It is really amazing to hear you tell that story.

Matthew Kim

I know the student of whom you are speaking. I will also say that when she came here, she was also an anxious writer. And by the end of her time here, she accompanied me to Germany to give a conference paper at a rhetoric and writing studies conference.

Sue Cranford

And didn't you just come down from prepping students for a trip you're going on?

Matthew Kim

I did. In May, Cody Bliss, another alum and very fine English teacher, and I are taking three students to Tübingen, Germany, for a rhetoric and communication conference.

Sue Cranford

Wow.

Matthew Kim

And we are going to be talking about the rhetorical impacts of the global refugee crisis.

Sue Cranford

Wow. Can we tune into that? Okay, well, then we'll look for that link at some point on the website. And I am so thankful that you spent time with us, and I'm sure this has given everyone a lot to think about. And if there are more questions, you definitely know where to find me in the admission office. And I know where to find Matt, so we will contact you, and we are so happy. Matt, what would you like to say to our listeners before we have to go?

Matthew Kim

I was excited to share this moment with you. I want you to know that by sending your child to our school, they are going to have the very best reading and writing education. And when they leave here, they are going to be prepared to go into college, to go into a career as an effective communicator.

Sue Cranford

Wonderful. Thank you, Matt.