



## Episode 12: Live with Stephanie Dunson: Embracing the Messy Parts of Academic Writing

### SPEAKERS

Stephanie Dunson, Tierney King

#### Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by the Teaching Professor. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in

your everyday teaching. Today we have Stephanie Dunson with us who is a faculty writing coach and immersive thinking consultant. She recently started a podcast called, 100 Mistakes Academic Writers Make...and How to Fix Them. So to start, Stephanie, take us through how you went from being a professor to where you are now, because it's really a unique adventure that you've been on.

#### Stephanie Dunson 00:42

Yeah, I mean, I followed a kind of unconventional path because I was a writing specialist before getting my PhD. I had worked for a number of years as a consultant with the Bard institute for writing and thinking and had been director of the writing center at Mount Holyoke. And I reached a point where I decided I wanted to complete my doctoral study. And so I went to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, with the plan of working with Peter Elbow, who is sort of like the the big guy in composition and rhetoric, a very sweet man. But when I got into that program, I realized that it was really calibrated more toward writing programs at larger universities, and I was much more interested and thinking about the implications of writing at the liberal arts level. And so what I did in my program was sort of pivot, you know? I decided to switch into the American Studies track. I liked the idea of that because it was interdisciplinary. I felt like intellectually, it was an area that I was curious about. And that worked out great. I mean, the idea of really making the dissertation itself, a writing project was really one of the things that I feel really laid the platform for my interest in working with faculty as writers, because that's not really the way that most people are trained to be scholars. I mean, you go to grad school, and you're taught to be a scholar, you're taught to be a researcher, but you're not really taught to be a writer, which, you know, to me, just seems like, you know, I guess I didn't realize how unique a path that was going to be. The problem was that, as a result of it, my dissertation became so successful, in terms of its content, that it gained a lot of recognition. I was awarded a Ford Foundation Fellowship for it. The dissertation itself had to do with race representation in 19th-century American culture. And so I came out of my program, you know, when I went to the job market, my assumption was that I was going to, you know, start looking for jobs in writing programs, and the thing that I found out afterwards, I mean, when I went on the job market, I assumed that I would get the jobs with writing programs, because that's sort of what I saw as the main trajectory. And I got a number of interviews, and no one wanted to hire me in that position. But I did, you know, get offers to be a professor of American Studies. I took a job at the University of Rhode Island, it's a lovely place, and I really love my colleagues and enjoy the work that I was doing there, and particularly enjoyed the work that I was able to do with graduate students, because I felt like, you know, my experience of thinking about graduate school as

sort of practice for writing practice for the profession, really got to play out in really meaningful ways with the with my students there. And in fact, I was looking, I was helping one of my advisees on the job market when I came across a job description for director of writing programs at Williams College. And, you know, I looked at that position. And in essence, it felt like that position was the position I'd been waiting for, because they wanted someone who was embedded in in that discipline had faculty experience, but would help them build a writing program from scratch based on you know, the needs of the college community. And a big part of my, my pitch when I was applying was the idea that if I was going to build a program from scratch, I wanted to be I wanted it to be a program that not just serve students, but also served faculty as writers. And I got to build a program that really gave me the opportunity to focus on faculty and faculty development around writing. It was really exciting work. It was really gratifying. And it was really needed. I mean, even at a place like Williams, again, it's that situation where people, you know, just don't get that kind of training, and often feel like they're unique in the fact that they struggle with writing. I was at Williams for nine years. Were in part because I live in Connecticut, and it was a two and a half hour commute. For me it felt like I it sort of had reached a seam in the program that made sense as a time for me to sort of adjust out and I knew from my experience There was a lot of interest from faculty at other institutions for the support that I gave. So I decided to leave Williams and sort of strike out as an independent consultant. And I've been very, very busy. Ever since I mean, it, it happened more quickly. I mean, within a few weeks of leaving Williams, it just felt like my mailbox was full. And so it's just been, it's just been great. I mean, it's just exciting to work with people, exciting to support them in ways that that they haven't been supported before. exciting to see how quickly they adapt, and how meaningful their writing becomes for them, just through some adjustments in the way that they're thinking about approaching writing. I'm really, I'm really pleased and excited that I've been able to follow this path.

**Tierney King 05:48**

Going off of that, recently, you actually started a podcast to kind of help, you know, academic writers on this journey. And so kind of diving into your second episode it's about the final product of published writing. So it's about embracing those messy parts, which I think relates to a lot of people, and how those messy parts are necessary to create, you know, the final piece of the published work where it's polished, and it looks good, but it wasn't always that way. So kind of tell us a little more about this and how you encourage academic writers in that process.

**Stephanie Dunson 06:23**

Yeah, that episode, where the mistake is being seduced by the published page, because I think that so often a problem that people have, you know, is all day we read things that are finished writing that's already been polished, you know, it's polished and completed, and there's a way that that expectation of what writing looks like gets absorbed into just sort of our psyche. And so it can feel like writing is only, you know, working, it's only the legitimate, when it feels pretty finished. The truth of the matter is, the writing process is much messier. You know, people are for much of their academic development, they can produce a piece of writing that feels like it's pretty static from the beginning, you know, if your assumption is that writing has to look very finished, and I'm writing 10 to 20 page paper, there's a way that if you sort of compress yourself enough, you can make that happen. But when you start getting into the dissertation, when you start getting into sort of more independent scholarship, that model doesn't work as well, right? Because writing itself is a process of figuring out, and this is a kind of thing that

often when I when I share this information with my clients they're not resistant to it, because there's a sense to it, you know? It's like, you know, when you write your writing is messy, that's okay. Everyone's writing is messy writing and is a process. You know, and one way for you to get a sense of what you have to say, is really the sort of allow the writing to sort of be all over the place at the, you know, at the beginning of the process, because you can always fix it up later on. And I think that for most people, just that idea is such a relief, you know, the fact that their writing doesn't have to be perfect, that there's not something wrong with them if their writing isn't neat. And in fact, that trying to get it perfect to begin with is really truncating the relationship with writing is something that people generally embrace. I mean, the way I often describe it to people is through analogy of sculpture. You can build a sculpture from clay, or you can build it from, you know, a block of marble, right? With the model clay, you're using every bit of it, right? And that's the model that a lot of times people sort of take to their thinking of writing. It's just like, everything has to be right, everything has to find a place. But there's a story you know, it might be apocryphal of Michelangelo. Someone asked him a question about the David that he had sculpted and and they asked, "How did you create this figure?" And he said, "Well, I got quality piece of marble, and I chipped away everything that wasn't the statue, right?" And that's really more than a model. It's just like, you create excess, you allow yourself the flexibility to, you know, mess things up and, you know, misdirect things. And then once you have that block of information, you chip away the things that aren't necessary. It's not that that stuff that gets chipped away is wasted, or that you wasted time writing it. You have to often produce that mess in order to get to the thing that you really want to say. But I mean, it's the other thing where, you know, as I mentioned, when I work with people, that the first thing I asked when I work with people is what's working? What are you doing that's working for you? And you know, there are people who need to write and think and work in that way. And my sense is, if that's working for you, that's fine. So part of the path to getting people to change is to offer them the change in a way that makes sense for them, right? And so it's just like, if you have found out a way to sit down and write out an effective article from beginning to end in a linear fashion, and it works for you, that's great. I'm not going to mess with that. But I think that if that's not the way that you work, here are some other ways to think about it. And here are some other things to try. That's why I like to give people small things to work with, so that they can get comfortable with how that's going to work with them. And then they start to trust the process, and they trust their own intuition around the methods.

#### **Tierney King 10:31**

You know, people want to try these new things when they're writing and everything. And one of the things that people are trying to be more intentional about is publishing work that embraces culture and diversity within their writing. So, you know, when academic writers are looking for research and writing research, where can they start to be more intentional about this process?

#### **Stephanie Dunson 10:54**

Well, I mean, I think that it's a kind of universal design question. I think the idea of diversity, too often people think of that as a kind of a silo in and of itself. I mean, it's a question of how to do good scholarship. And a lot of the elements of thinking broadly about a topic are really features of doing good scholarship, right? Thinking about when you're writing, you know, what assumptions are you making? What exceptions are you assuming? I'm a big advocate for leaning into areas that you are resistant to, or are confused by to feel like it's not just a matter of going with the thing that you know, definitively, but

thinking about the compelling areas that seem like they're meaningful things to explore. Where you're not sure exactly where you're going to come out. But you're going to lean into that and allow those questions and doubts and places of uncertainty to actually be another way of sort of exploring and thinking more deeply about a project. So I mean, I don't think it's, you know, again, I'm very much into sort of using writing techniques that feel organic to the way that a person is writing. I think that if the idea is well, now I'm going to be altruistic and think in diverse ways about this, that starts to feel artificial. But I mean, asking the question of, you know, what's the context here? You know, what am I leaving out? What are the gaps? What are the points of resistance? And what do those things mean? What's the story that's not getting told here? And it's not that that someone has to necessarily bring this directly into the result of what they're writing, but it's just good intellectual work thinking that way, and it makes for scholarship that is richer, and is open to those kinds of questions of inclusiveness and diversity, if they're legitimate, you know, questions for the thing that they're that they're exploring. But I think it just makes for, you know, better scholar, and just to ask somebody, it's like, what are the assumptions that you're making? Right? There are a range of intellectual interventions that can happen out of that, that enrich the work, that's the scholarship that someone is doing diversity and inclusiveness is a component of that. But again, I mean, it's not a matter of sort of isolating the thing, unless that feels like that's real path that you're on. If there's a real point of tension, and there needs to be more integration or involvement of larger things, then that's, again, the value of leaning into that, and letting the writing help you figure it out. Like why am I resistant to this? What feels like it's missing? How does this increase or diminish my output? If I approach it in this way, what concerns me about this, you know, this is one of the other things that I've talked about in the podcast. And in fact, I'm working on a special episode on this, because there's been a lot of interest in this is process writing or metacognitive writing, right? And that's writing where, you know, after you've done a piece of writing, you stand back and allow a bit of writing to reflect on what you thought about as you were doing that writing. And so, you know, the idea of what did you think about saying, but choose not to, and why? Where were the places where you felt drawn in and pushed out and why to sort of get to a meta level of thinking about the way that you're relating to it and writing. You know, writing conditions a great place to explore this kind of stuff. So, you know, that's, that's my my general suggestion.

**Tierney King 14:30**

Yeah, I think that, you know, there's a lot of people, we have a story in mind that we want to share. And there's those gaps that sometimes we just miss, and we don't step back and look at the whole picture. You don't necessarily have to include it in your work, but it is good to acknowledge it and to be aware of it. And absolutely, sometimes there are parts where you missed it and you're like, Oh, yeah, I want to include that in my piece. So I think that's really, really great advice. And you kind of talked about some future podcast episodes, but is there any specific upcoming topics or episodes that you're most excited for?

**Stephanie Dunson 15:04**

Well I am excited about the episode on metacognitive writing, I'm working on getting an old colleague of mine, Erica Kaufman, who's director of the Bard Institute for writing and thinking to talk with me because I mean, I could talk about process writing, but I think it's more interesting to hear a conversation. And she's someone who, you know, I know will have really great things to say about that. I'm really looking forward to an episode that I'm going to be doing soon on the mistake of resisting or

feeling fearful about getting reviews, getting comments back, you know, that almost point of terror when you send something and reviewers comments are coming back; a lot of times that's something that you know, sort of throws people into a panic, or it can sort of stop them and make them doubt themselves. But I mean, I think that there's a lost opportunity where people can shift their thinking about how to make use of what reviewers say, even if, you know, it seems like it stings at first. So I'm really excited about that. I am most excited about episodes, where I know that from my experience, they've really had the most transformative impact on on the people who I've worked with. I'm excited to get that information out. And so those are some of the ones that are upcoming, but really, you know, like I say, I have the the list, I don't know, maybe it will become 200 mistakes academic writers make by the end of it. This is the great thing about every thing on the list, when I get to it I'm just like, "Oh, goody, that one now I get to do that one. And now I get to do that one." Because, like I say, I mean, it's just really gratifying. I mean, I've seen so many situations where there are faculty members who really, really struggle and they struggle unnecessarily. So anything that I know is going to make a difference that makes people feel hopeful or excited or makes their scholarship meaningful, especially those those small adjustments, because the thing is, it's not sort of rewiring everything. But a lot of times when I meet with someone, it'll just be one or two things that I say, you know. I ran into someone a while ago who I'd worked with 10 years ago. And he said, you know there's this thing that you said that I think about now every time I write you know this one thing, that this just sort of changed the way that I approach almost everything that I write, and that's really gratifying.

**Tierney King 17:39**

That's amazing. And then lastly, kind of as we reflect on the past year, what advice do you have for, you know, teachers, instructors, academic leaders, as they start to make their way back into the classroom. I know that you've led workshops for teachers on writing, innovative pedagogy, effective curricular design. And so what encouragement or motivation can you give our listeners as they end this semester, and then start to prepare for the fall semester?

**Stephanie Dunson 18:10**

That is such a big question. I have to say, I do still teach occasionally in the graduate liberal studies program at Wesleyan University, and I taught a course this past fall, that was my first online course. The first day after the first class, and this is a course on humor, after the first class, I was just like, I don't know if I can do this. I mean, I hate this so much, just not having the students in the room. And I genuinely wasn't sure if I'd be able to make it through the semester. And ultimately, you know, it became a really great class, so I mean, I think that what I'm looking forward to when I get back in the classroom is just having, you know, sort of warm breathing bodies in the room. And sort of, I think that with students at all levels, there's a hunger for that kind of connection. And I think, in a lot of ways, a real gratitude for what happens in the classroom that wasn't visible, or that was taken for granted by a lot of people. I think that writing generally can be a really great tool in the classroom, to give students an opportunity to reflect, it provides a kind of space for introspection, that then can also be made public, you know, and situations where the students can or are encouraged to share that information. So I mean, so I go into the classroom, I go, I use writing in very dynamic ways in all of my classes regardless of what I'm teaching, but just sort of allowing people you know, some time and space to be reflective. I mean, this has been a troubling but ultimately powerful experience that we've all been through and I will be really excited to see what of the individual experiences that students have had

translate into the community. of the classroom. I think that you know, thinking of it that way, it makes the return something that I feel like I can be really excited about. I don't know what it's going to be. I don't know what's going to look like. But I think it's going to be something that's really dynamic and new and powerful if there are ways to sort of channel that interest and that energy.

**Tierney King 20:19**

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