

## Episode 3.15 Doing Feminism in the Classroom

January 25, 2019

- Hannah (Host): [00:06](#) [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda* and welcome back for another minisode. This January has been somehow wildly busy. I mean, I say "somehow," I know exactly why it's been wildly busy. It's because I, as an adult who is allowed to make decisions for myself, made a series of decisions for myself, and those decisions involved doing things that made me really busy. So there you go. You know that song that goes [Music: "Just" by Radiohead"]
- Thom Yorke: [00:44](#) /You do it to yourself, you do/And that's what really hurts/Is that you do it to yourself, just you/You and no one else/You do it to yourself
- Hannah (Host): [00:44](#) Yeah, that one. I do it to myself, I do. That's why it really hurts. Anyway, it's been a busy month, but I have ahead of me like, a solid seven weeks where I'm basically not leaving Vancouver and I'm so stoked for it. I do have some dental surgery during that time, but that's fine. I mean it's not fine, I'm full of horror and dread, but still excited about how much I get to hang out with my cats. Anyway, I'm not here to talk about travel, or dental surgery, or cats, even though those are all completely valid topics. No, I'm going to pick up on the thread from my conversation in the last episode with the Vivek Shraya and talk a little bit more today about teaching. So I guess my secret feminist agenda for today is doing feminism in the classroom? [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]
- Hannah (Host): [01:51](#) So in part I'm inspired to talk about this because Vivek and I talked about it in the last episode and because I've been getting some really thoughtful and engaged responses to that. And an interestingly diverse responses, you know, some people reaching out to me and saying, "I hear you saying that you love teaching, but I don't. And it makes me feel a way to see all of these other feminist academics really loving teaching into, to experience myself as not loving it," which I think is a really valid and important point, cuz I think in my defense of teaching and the way it's been undermined, I have a tendency to maybe lean too hard in the other direction and be like, "teaching is the right and True Path. And if you like research more, you're a bad person somehow." And that can't possibly be the case. That would be an outrageous thing to say. I've also had some responses from high school teachers, which I always really loved

the opportunity to talk about teaching with other teachers who don't teach in the university. I think that university teachers have a lot to learn from high school teachers. Maybe vice versa? Hard to say. That feels like a bolder claim. But yeah, I love having those conversations and figuring out the way that teaching has these sort of continuous skills, these skills that sort of apply across different levels of education, you know, elementary, secondary, postsecondary, graduate, postgraduate, I'm not sure what the various level of education are. You know, I'm reminded of a conversation that I had in the car, on the way home from chorus rehearsal, with my friend Nancy, who is a high school teacher who was talking about a frustration that I myself have absolutely experienced, which is the frustration of having students who come to your classroom without necessarily having the skills you need them to have to do an assignment, but also being like, "it's not my job to teach you the skill." You know, so I'm trying to teach my students the history of publishing, but nobody has ever taught them how to effectively discuss a reading in a small group before and I'm like, that somebody else should have done that. It's outrageous that I need to teach my students this skill. And Nancy made the point, it was a point she was directing towards herself, but it was one that really spoke to me, which is that your job as a teacher is to teach the students you have, not to teach a subject. You teach students not a subject. And that was, I've been trying to really hold onto that and think about what it means to be like, cool. You know, I have some learning outcomes, have some content that I would like to deliver to them. But my primary job is to teach these people who are here in this room in front of me.

Hannah (Host):

[04:27](#)

Not to teach a, sort of, arbitrary or semi arbitrary set of things. But I also in addition to sort of being inspired by the response from last week's episode, I've also been thinking about a piece of the peer review from season two, A and I'm going to read you a little chunk of it for those of you who haven't gone him read at Yourselves Chai assume as a bunch of few. Anyway, this was a piece of Dr. Anna Poletti's review of season two. She asked "what is the relationship between scholarship and teaching? And went on to say "Given the use of personal storytelling and interviews in the podcast, this project also raised for me the question of whether the rising importance of scholarly impact is not so much driving the need for innovation as such, but bringing together elements of academic work that the neoliberal management structures in the profession have attempted to cast as separate (and separable) domains of academic practice, namely scholarship and teaching. It has been widely discussed how the increased use of adjunct faculty in

North American contexts, casualized and contract teaching in Australia, the UK and The Netherlands, have reshaped the philosophy and practice of teaching and research as the primary activities of the university. Several times whilst listening to the podcast, I wondered whether what McGregor was doing in *Secret Feminist Agenda* was more akin to teaching than to research. Given the scholarship/teaching definition of the profession is underpinned by a binary logic of gender (masculinity is associated with research/femininity with teaching), I began to think that a possible scholarly contribution to feminism made by *Secret Feminist Agenda* is not to bring scholarship out from the confines of the university by publishing it differently, but to bring teaching—as a praxis, an ethics, a political action dedicated to education as a form of freedom—out of the university. Paradoxically, this in itself, could be the most significant contribution the project makes to feminism scholarship. By suggesting this, I am inviting you and Dr. McGregor to extend the boundary blurring impulse of the project slightly further, and consider all elements of academic practice, not just research, as being subject to change through the activity of podcasting," end lengthy quote.

Thom Yorke:

[06:48](#)

I really loved this, I mean, I loved a lot of the peer review, but I really loved this piece of Doctor [inaudible] feedback, particularly for how it, sort of, encouraged me to think about the podcast not necessarily just as public pedagogy but also not just as public research, but as an activity that blurs the boundaries between the two. And that really speaks to me in terms of what this project is doing. In some ways it structurally resembles research more, in terms of how I do my research versus how I do my teaching. Which is to say it's, in a lot of ways, a pretty sort of unit directional address. You know? I am talking at you and, and you can listen and you can, you can tweet at me and you can respond to me, but you're, we're not engaged in a conversation. And in the classroom, I'm trying to engage people in a conversation. I'm trying to get people to talk and respond to me, but I also use lecture as a form in the classroom, and, and there is particularly in these mini episodes, you know, something akin to the genre of the lecture happening. And really, when I think about how public scholarship for me takes on the work of translating and making accessible specialized forms of knowledge in that way, the podcast is a lot like what I do in a lecture, where I'm often giving context, and definitions, and framing things in a way that is perhaps different than how I would write an essay. Because a lot of the times when I'm writing an essay for a journal, I'm assuming a really, sort of, narrow specialized audience that has particular kinds of knowledge upfront. So I'm excited by this

way of thinking about the podcast by the way, that it suggests a valorizing of teaching a serious scholarly work, which I really appreciate because, as per previous episodes of the podcast, I value teaching a lot, and I think it's important, and skill based, and technical scholarly work. And also because I share a lot of other academics' concern with the way that the work of the university has been divided out into these three categories. And that is research, teaching, and service. For those of you who don't know, for a research faculty position like mine, the expectation has roughly that'll be spending 40% of my time doing research, 40% of my time teaching, and 20% doing service. And that's often a surprise to people who don't work in the university because the part that they're familiar with is the teaching part. Again, not surprising if you've been to university, that was the only part you saw. But you know professors are like icebergs; more of us under the surface than above. That was a bad simile. Anyway, so we are supposed to be doing things that fall, kind of, neatly into these three categories and the very strong implication in research universities is that really research is the thing we should be taking the most seriously. Research is the most prestigious, it's the most important part of our jobs, particularly research that brings in money. That's really what you want. You want grants, you want to be bringing money into the university. Teaching is good, but teaching better doesn't bring more money into the university. And so really at a lot of institutions, again, there's a kind of tacit culture in which you need to teach just well enough to not get in trouble, but going above and beyond in terms of working on your teaching isn't particularly valued. Whereas going above and beyond in terms of your research can have actual monetary value to it. The same goes for service. Service includes things like sitting on committees, whether those are committees within your department or within your university, or committees in disciplinary associations. You know, maybe you peer reviewing articles, reviewing submissions to conferences, helping to organize conferences, reading and making decisions about student applications, meeting and talking about redesign of the curriculum, or about changing the way student evaluations work. Like those are, those are examples of the kinds of things we do that fall under the rubric of service, and service is very important, but again, very low, low prestige work. And because it is low procedures work at disproportionately as practiced by women and by racialized faculty. And interestingly in the first round of the peer review for *Secret Feminist Agenda*, one of the reviewers, Amanda French pointed out that the podcast also blurs the boundaries between research and service. So it's interesting to see that, that there's something boundary blurring happening in both directions about this work, and the

blurring of those boundaries matters because it's about the kinds of labor that we consider valuable. To refer back to Dr Poletti's discussion of scholarship and teaching, you know, her point is that teaching is very clearly undervalued compared to research, because teaching is being casualized, made increasingly precarious, disproportionately done by, by contract workers with very little job security, whereas research faculty continued to be associated with things like tenure and academic freedom. So there's sort of piece two of why I'm thinking a lot about teaching today. You know, piece one is the, the feedback about my conversation with Vivek, piece two is thinking about this response to the peer review and sort of podcasting as public pedagogy, which I find really evocative and interesting. And then piece three is actually a conversation that I had in the classroom yesterday, that I've been thinking about a lot this week.

Hannah (Host):

[12:32](#)

This week in one of my classes, we were having a conversation about the emergence of the newspaper as a form of new media in the 17th and 18th centuries and the kinds of impacts that medium has had on politics, on public discourse, on the sort of democratizing move towards participation in public debates, and whether or not newspapers can be linked to things like freedom of speech and, sort of, free and open discourse. And you know, at one point a student suggested that, you know, that obviously newspapers have bias, and then linked to the sort of structural bias of newspapers to the university, as an institution that is also biased, and particularly the university as an institution that is biased against conservative thought. And the conversation that we ended up having, I hope was productive. You know, we talked about the university as a whole versus the politics of individual disciplines. And I think that's a point that gets lost quite often in these conversations about the sort of overwhelming liberal nature of the university, is that usually what we're talking about is a small handful of politicized disciplines. So those are disciplines that are oriented towards social justice in some way, and unsurprisingly they tend not to be dominated by forms of social conservatism. That said, those disciplines are ultimately a, a tiny minority within the university as a structure, where most of the money and most of the power is associated with disciplines and departments that would look much more conservative than say, a literature department or a gender and women's studies department. And I'll link to a really great piece by Tressie Mcmillan Cottom where she makes basically this point that universities look very different than, sort of media, discussion would suggest. But to quote briefly from that piece she writes, "But even elite institutions are not nearly as radical as the alt-right believes.

They are, if anything, the finishing schools for conservative economics, social science and social policy. A handful of gender studies courses could not begin to check the power of an economics department or a business school at any university in the U.S. The college down the street from most Americans is a conservative institution that is sensitive to the pluralist needs of the students they serve because its economic viability depends on it," end quote. So obviously there's a reason why the media wants to frame campuses, according to the, sort of, PC, safe space, liberal hysteria rhetoric. Part of the conversation we ended up having was indeed how contemporary media is invested in framing identity according to a binary between liberalism and conservatism, insisting that people must fit into one or the other, and also that that's the sort of relevant frame of reference for discussing any kinds of disagreements or any kinds of structures. And so to talk about the university as a liberal versus a conservative institution really, sort of, limits the frames through which we can look at the kind of work that's happening here. So, so yes, and the one hand we can say an economics department is probably more conservative than a gender studies department. That is probably the case. And we can say, you know, on a broad scale, the university is for the most part of sort of small "c" conservative institution. And that that will vary from institution to institution obviously. So the politics of an institution like my own are not necessarily the same of, for other university and college. In fact I would say are, by definition, not going to be the same because these are institutions that are run by people, and they have different priorities, and they have different histories. But ultimately a thing I find really interesting is the way that the media framing of liberalism versus conservatism, the right versus the left (I switched those orders to confuse and baffle all of you) obscures the degree of actual nuance and complexity at work in identity. So we might say universities are liberal or this department is liberal, but that liberalism is in fact something that for a lot of us looks fairly centrist, fairly sort of big "L" Liberal, and not as radical as some people would like. That liberalism doesn't necessarily make space for different kinds of diversity, or for different identities, or for different students. But it's interesting for me to hold these things together, to hold together the knowledge that some students come into the university, lots of students come into the university feeling like there isn't space for them, but that feeling of there not being space for them comes from a wide variety of different perspectives. Not everybody feels like there isn't space for them in the same way. So some students arrive in the university and they're first generation university students, and they feel that there isn't space for them in the sense that they're unfamiliar with the

institution and how it works. They don't know how to navigate the, sort of, tacit social norms and cultural norms of the classroom, of relating to professors, and so they feel like they're already starting behind. Some students come into a Canadian university, having done all of their previous education in a different country with really different, again, cultural and social norms in terms of classroom behavior. And they feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the way that classrooms are run in Canada, or are in the country they're studying. And some students come into the university with disabilities and encounter the deep, ingrained ableism of the institution early on and get a very strong message that, that the classroom or the university is not a space that's really for them. Whether that's through professors refusing to accommodate their needs, through the ableism of classmates, or through the way that the norms of how a class is run, how a semester unfolds, what a degree looks like, are all of themselves premised around, you know, really ablest understanding of, of what it means to be a student. And some students come into the university feeling like the opinions and perspectives and politics that they're going to bring to bear and won't be heard. And I don't just mean conservative politics here. I don't just mean students who come into the university with a strong sense of themselves as conservatives, I also mean Indigenous students who come into the university and experience it as being a colonial institution that doesn't make space for them, Black students who come into the university and experiences that as a white supremacist institution that doesn't make space for them. Those are also often students who have strong politics that emerged out of their lives and communities beyond the university, and who experience the classroom as a hostile environment. But again, in conversations about the politics of this institution, there tends to be a lot of focus on conservative students feeling silenced and a lot less focus on, you know, Black, Indigenous, and person of color students, trans and nonbinary students, disabled students also not feeling like there is space for them here. The reality of the university, and this is a point that friend and former guest, Andrea Hasenbank actually made when she was visiting my class earlier this week. And that is that in the 21st century, the demographic of students in universities has changed really significantly. Students are busier than they used to be. They're more likely to have jobs. They have to work longer hours to be able to afford housing. As student bodies diversify, that means students come in with sometimes fewer financial resources, sometimes greater or different kinds or familial social obligations. You know, students are caretakers for parents, or grandparents, or for children. Students are parents themselves. Students are doing all kinds of work. Students are

complex and diverse people, and that is becoming more and more the case. And an attachment to notions of the classroom and notions of what education looks like that is premised on a student body from 50 years ago, I mean, it just doesn't work today. That's just the reality and that includes, and this was Andrea's point, that when we hear things like "students today aren't as good at encountering complex texts as students were 50 years ago." We have to ask ourselves like, is it that they're not as good at it or is it that they don't have the time? Is it that students today are busier and don't have two hours to sit down in a totally quiet space and totally dedicate themselves to reading something? That might be the reality, and to go right back to the beginning of the episode and Nancy's point about effective teaching, you teach the student. You teach the students you have in the classroom. Anyway, those were a lot of thoughts about teaching. And really, what I'd like to do is invite any of you who are teachers, or students, or both to let me know how these resonate with you in terms of your experiences of teaching, in terms of your experiences of being a student. I love talking about teaching. I love talking about learning. These are very much my jam. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] You know, who else is very much my jam? Yeah, it's Kaarina. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Kaarina:

[22:30](#)

Hello and welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. Today I am thinking about reading, and not just any kind of reading. I'm thinking about those times when you don't have that kind of focus and drive to get into books, especially so-called "serious literature." I often experience this, my partner often experiences this. I don't know if anybody else does. Like, maybe you're coming off a semester's worth of schoolwork or teaching and, and you haven't had time to read for pleasure, and it's hard to get back into books and remember how to make them relaxing part of your life. And generally what I do when I'm feeling that way is that checkouts and young adult literature. My all time fave is Sarah Dessen, who writes pretty formulaic young adult novels about teenage girls falling in love, in small towns in North Carolina. Yeah, that's her thing. Maybe it's South Carolina. Maybe I've got it wrong, but they're all in one of the Carolinas and they all have pretty much the same story arc. But I love them. And they are super comforting, and they get me reading again. Lately I've also been checking out a lot of queer young adult novels, which on the one hand make me wistful that queerness was not a part of my teenage years, but also give me a chance to, kind of, experience that, you know, like live vicariously through teenagers who have a stronger hold of their queer identity and he'll have queer experiences in their teenage years. So my recent favorite was *Like Water* by Rebecca Podos,

which is, has a Latina, bisexual protagonist, and deals with class and chronic illness, and grief, and gender identity, and is just so, so pleasurable to read and so beautifully written. My other all time fave is *The Wonderous Woo* by Carrienne Leung, which is just a heartbreakingly beautiful novel about a young woman and her relationship with her siblings. Her siblings wake up as child prodigies one day and she doesn't. And it's about, kind of, family and identity, as all young adult novels I think are about. But it pulled me back into reading after my first year of Grad school, which was very hard and very much a strained my relationship to books, which I'm sure some of you can identify with. I sat down with *The Wonderous Woo* and I didn't get up for about 10 hours until I'd finished it. And it was one of the most delightful reading experiences in my life. So here's my shout out to young adult literature. Checked out another young adult novel today. Looking forward to it. Let me know your fave young adult novels on Twitter. Let it be known that I don't really care about fantasy, but I'm happy to hear what fantasy books he love. I just will not read them. So I'm going to go curl up with a book, and I hope you have a cozy, delightful weekend. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Hannah (Host):

[26:29](#)

As always, you can find show notes and the rest of the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on [secretfeministagenda.com](http://secretfeministagenda.com). You can follow me on Twitter @hkpcgregor. You can follow Kaarina @Kaarinasaurus and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. Also, you can rate and review the podcast on Apple Podcast, which you should. Nobody did this week, and I'm not going to take it personally, or am I? The podcast's theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album Chub Rub. You can download the entire album on [freemusicarchive.org](http://freemusicarchive.org) or follow them on Facebook. Kaarina's theme song is "I Will" by Mitski. *Secret Feminist Agenda* is recorded on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh first nations where I'm grateful to live and work. This has *been Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]