

107. Preparing for Spring 2025 w/ Dr. Meghan P. Nolan

This transcript is not 100% revised

Dan Dissinger: [00:00:00] Welcome everyone to another episode of Writing Remix. I'm your host, Dan Dissinger, and today I'm joined by my good friend from St. John's Past, Megan, uh, Associate Professor Dr. Meghan P. Nolan, who is also the chair of the Sam Draper Honors Program at SUNY Rockland.

Megan, thank you so much for being on the podcast today.

Meghan P. Nolan: Thank you for having me, my friend. This is awesome. I always love coming and joining you in these discussions.

Dan Dissinger: Yeah. And also, like, it's just fun to see you. I mean, it's, um, we've, we were saying before we, well, as we were recording, as I will probably post some of these outtakes, um, as content, but that it's been too long.

And like, you know, we've had, you know, Um, Uh, you know, our time at St. John's is just one of the funniest, I think, uh, if I had to choose a doctoral program and choose a time [00:01:00] that I was like, oh, you know what? I chose the right place with the right people. I'm glad that, like, there was that day I walked into the writing center.

I was like, That person understands me.

And now we're out in the world, molding people's brains. I mean, look at us, but I mean, that's what today's episode is all about. I mean, the start of the semester where we are starting the spring 2025 semester, uh, me next week, as I'm recording this on January. Also, unfortunately, we are experiencing severe fires here in Los Angeles.

So, you know, as we talk about the beginning of the semester and what this episode is supposed to be to kind of focus on this idea of like what we are bringing into the 2025 semester. Um, I mean, With disasters like this, it's like all the planning kind of goes out the window. But, uh, Megan, if you would just also give, you know, people who are [00:02:00] hearing this episode, the podcast for the first time and meet you for the first time, why don't you give them a little bit more about who you are and kind of what you do there at SUNY Rockland.

Meghan P. Nolan: Yeah, so I've been working there since 2016, um, and, uh, you know, slowly moving my way up the ranks as an English professor, as we all do. Um, but, um, it's, it's been interesting. Um, and then pivoted into, uh, the chair of the honors program. Um, so I've been involved in a lot of different things on campus. Um, I ran the reading and writing center for a long time.

Um, and then pivoted into, uh, the chair of the honors program. And I've been running that program for the last few years, and that's been enlightening and really just joyful getting to work with the honor students. We send those students to some of the best colleges in the country and just getting them before they go off to like a Yale or Harvard.

A [00:03:00] Cornell is just amazing. So that's been awesome. Um, but I've also been on the union. It was I just finished my term as the 1st vice president. President of the RCCFT, and I served as that in that position for three years. Um, and that was three long, hard years because when I joined, I was expecting to have to be a part of, um, the firing of a president, the, or a lot of things going on, um, and I'm also on faculty Senate executive committee.

So I sort of serve as a faculty leader as well as a faculty member. So I'm kind of. I'm in the trenches in both respects, both the classroom and the administrative piece. And so it's been, um, it's been a wild ride. I can say that much.

Dan Dissinger: Yeah. I mean, and, and I mean, just that experience of having both faculty and administrative, I mean, the beginning of your semester is almost like starts.

In a, in many different [00:04:00] ways, like you have administrative beginnings. I mean, pretty much starting or never stopping and then

Meghan P. Nolan: working. That's just it. Like, I don't have to go back for two weeks for classes, but I have to work this week.

Dan Dissinger: So how do you balance that? I get, because I've, I know in terms of administrative at USC, I think, um, our director, uh, uh, Dr.

Nora Ash, she has, she teaches one or two, Classes once every other semester, I forget how it goes, but most of the time, she is the director of the writing program and doing all the administrative work for being a director of like a large program with over maybe close to 100 people that are teaching the writing program.

Um, but. How do you balance the administrative and then the faculty part of your identity in terms of like how a semester begins? Possibly

Meghan P. Nolan: it is. It's difficult sometimes, but no, it becomes a lot of times. It's kind of like parceling it out in [00:05:00] terms of scheduling. So, especially like, during the semester, once a semester.

Especially at the beginning of the semester, I have to make sure that I set aside certain days in order to do the administrative work and then other days for grading. Otherwise, like, the grading falls behind and I never get to that stuff. And that feedback to the students is extremely important. And so I find myself, like, creating a very sort of rigid schedule for myself in the beginning.

So that I know that I have these specific days to work on these administrative tasks. And these other days are hours a lot of times in between classes.

To work on the actual academic stuff, but then on top of that, I have, you know, office hours where students are coming to me for things. And, um, it's not just my own students.

I get students from across the campus because I'm the honors chair and we have students who are in every single discipline. So they're coming to me all the time. So it's, um, it's a complicated endeavor. And quite frankly, [00:06:00] I just kind of make it work. I've, I've learned to be a lot more flexible than I think I ever knew I was, if that makes sense.

I always thought I was like this very like rigid individual, you know what I mean? Like, I'm, I'm kind of realizing that I'm, I'm way more flexible than I thought I was. And one of the ways that that's, and this, I mean, you can probably identify with this, but like, I used to do a lot of classroom prep, like a ridiculous amount of classroom prep in order to feel like really comfortable going in.

That's completely gone out the window.

That's like, I, so I've, I've learned to sort of trust my instincts a lot more as a professor and look, we're, we're mid career at this point. It's kind of weird to think about that, like officially tip that balance, but I trust my instincts a lot more as a professor. And so. I don't feel the need to overly plan my lessons because I found that they're a lot better when they're more [00:07:00] organic because a lot of times it's based on what those students are saying in the

classroom, um, how they're reacting to the course material, the literature that we're discussing, those things.

And so I think I've gotten better at being flexible in the classroom and that's helped me manage the administrative piece outside of the classroom. Did that answer your question? I think so.

Dan Dissinger: Yeah. I mean, Yeah. I mean, I think what's interesting is like, when I was coming out of the semester yet last month, last semester to fall 2024, I was at that point, I was like starting that one.

I prepped only the idea of being like, I'm going to read. I am going to put more books into my, into my syllabus, right? Now I teach in a writing program. We are a writing program at USC, right? And not that we don't do reading, but no one sits there and goes, we're ordering books. But every semester I used to get these book order emails and I'm like, I really want to do that because our background is [00:08:00] literature.

I love teaching any sort of reading paired with the writing, right? And I, especially now, I feel like with students. In the generation of students that we're teaching, sitting to read a whole book gives them a thing that they don't see, which is like a long term analysis laid out, right? Like being like, over time, what a writer has to do.

So I included All About Love, All They Will Call You, All About Love by Bell Hooks, Um, All They Will Call You by Tim Hernandez, who also wrote a follow up to his book, so shout out to his new book. Um, They Call You Back, so. Check that out. He's an amazing writer. And, um, and then we, I would like parse out chapters of pedagogy to your press.

Right. So we did a lot of reading and I was like, you know what? I talked to her

Meghan P. Nolan: too this semester. So

Dan Dissinger: always fun, always fun. But my students really loved all about love. And I think also they really loved the idea of reading. So [00:09:00] coming into this semester, I'm like, I'm teaching an advanced writing course and I'm teaching social sciences.

So I'm like, I'm going to teach, um, all about love again. And Eli Clare's book, Exile and Pride, which is a great text, which is a great text. I haven't taught it in a very long time and I'm looking forward to it. But something I'm taking in is

what you said. I think my class prep is much more on the side of being like, How can I include more text for me, but also not plan out every day.

Like my first week is good. Like I know what I'm doing my first week. I know what the assignments look like. I've revised some of my assignments. I'm good to go. Like I, but my prep is much more like Especially now with the fires happening in L. A. being like, what is the first week going to even look like?

And I think like, what we've both said in both learning is that flexibility is key, because like, we might plan something, but our students Like they have lives too. And that's what I've been learning over the [00:10:00] course of my career is like, I'm dealing with separate lives, like, and they all these different things are going on with them.

And so like, we have to have to be as flexible as I possibly can and still get them through like what I want them to learn. Right. So it's an interesting like balance of, you know, what I want, what I expect, but also how the world is. And what that's playing into it, you

Meghan P. Nolan: know, that's the funny thing is that like I've I've recognized more so in like the last like few years that, um, like I used to be obsessed with like cramming everything in that I had on the syllabus, like at the beginning, you know what I mean?

And it was like, I got this done, got to get this done. And like, I've realized, no, like I, I've become much better at feeling out the class. And so sometimes I will. Ditch 1 assignment in lieu of something else that I think is more beneficial to that particular cohort. Um, and so, um, you know, [00:11:00] even even with that, because I'm I'm, uh, like, and I don't want people to think that I'm not prepping at all.

Like, my syllabi, like, so. Students actually thank me because I lay out everything week by week, what we're doing. Um, but those things change. Like you said, I'm in New York. There are snow days. There are things, you know, there are things that happen. Um, so I adjusted as we go throughout the semester, but like.

Those I've I've learned that those assignments are malleable and it's not it's not about the assignments. It's about what those students need to learn in that particular group. And sometimes you have to adjust things. And so I've become better at that. And that's why I think like prepping for my courses, because I was

working on this yesterday, um, we use like an online system called D2L bright space.

Um, it replaced, yeah. So all of SUNY is using it now. Um, it's a wonderful system. I actually really like it. It's very intuitive. Um, and so, and it's [00:12:00] modernized things for us. Um, but setting up my core shells, I just make sure that I have everything in there because I've noticed. that that reduces panic for students, they really freak out if they don't know what's coming down the pike.

And so it's easier to start with everything in there and say, actually, we're not going to do this thing, or I'm adjusting these dates on these things than it is to go in with a blank slate and add things as you go. Because I've realized that creates a lot of, um, just tension for the students and particularly for the honors students.

Um, they're very high strung, just like me. And so they, you know, what's happening at all times. So I try, I try to help them out, you know, to the best of my ability. So that's, that's kind of what I do in terms of like prep work is just like having this, uh, this framework, but understanding that it's. It's, it's looser than it looks, uh, you know, I don't know.

Yeah. I feel

Dan Dissinger: like, I think [00:13:00] Brightspace has changed my approach. Like when I started using Brightspace, I guess a semester or two ago in the summer, I was like, Oh, this is actually way easier to use. Blackboard was trash. I want to be absolutely honest about that. That was trash. I had Blackboard. I used it as like a.

Uh, something because it was there and I needed something to do some stuff on. But with like Brightspace, I have everything ready. Like all my assignments are dated and ready. I actually figured out the grade book, which is nice. You know, though I do a double check on another thing, of course, because like sometimes those calculations are weird, but I think like.

And all my assignments are ready. Plus I use medium and I've been using medium for about five years now for students to like, feel what it's like to write real world work in a way, like in stuff. So they have information everywhere. And I think that's the thing I've been learning and going into like this semester is being like, it's not so much the week to week that sometimes my students really need.

It's just that, like, they need. The information for syllabi, due dates, [00:14:00] assignments, if I can put it in multiple places, they, the emails that come to me are so much less. Way less. Yeah. And like, my rule to them is, and I have, I've created boundaries with my therapist about like when people are allowed to email me now and stuff.

And I think I need to do that. I may

Meghan P. Nolan: need some advice.

Dan Dissinger: It's the greatest thing I did, Megan, from last year, last semester to this is now like, These are the times I will answer emails on these days. On this day, on like Saturday, one time, at this time, and none on Sunday. And like I've been holding to that pretty well.

And it's changed everything, and they email, and students email me less. Because I also tell them, please, if you have checked Brightspace, if you have checked Medium, if you have been able to double check something else, like the notes or whatever, and you still don't know what's going on, then email me. But if you haven't done any of those things first, then email me.

Do not email me and that's okay. You know, and then usually I

Meghan P. Nolan: [00:15:00] say that and I still get the emails.

And I'm like, wait, did you read my five emails?

Dan Dissinger: Well, I feel like that's the thing I've been learning is like, most of my job is, is boundary creating at this point. So in going into this semester, it's like, for me, it's just like, Are there more boundaries I can create to create more autonomy for my student?

Like, make them see that they're able to do this work without me hand holding them the entire time.

Meghan P. Nolan: You know what's interesting? Like, I've also been sort of boundary creating in my courses with students, but Not so much with me, because I think they understand where my boundaries are. I've had to teach them in my courses how to navigate other professors, which I find interesting.

Because they are very unaware of, um, [00:16:00] Inappropriate, uh, responses or how to, to approach professors in certain respects. And so I find myself like

lecturing to them about like social professional academic etiquette, um, in courses where that's not even a subject. Um, and so that's something that I've been building in.

More of and a part of that comes from my function as honor share, right? Because I feel like it's my obligation to explain these things to them. Um, but it's fascinating to me. Like, I just had a student who was very frustrated because a professor didn't get back to her about her. Great. Um, but I'm like the boundaries like you're talking about professors are off for winter break.

And so you can't expect him to get back to you until this particular date. Um, and we have to have reasonable expectations as humans, right? Like you're saying, like, you deserve some time. Off from responding to those emails. And so I think, [00:17:00] um, I don't know, like, do you think it's like the internet that created that, like, why, why do we have so few boundaries that way?

Like, I

Dan Dissinger: think it's internet is texting is because you don't, okay. So like, I don't. If I imagine if we didn't have the amount of emailing and the amount of, and if students weren't doing the amount of texting or the amount of social media posting or whatever, or DMing and everything, and they had to actually make a phone call.

Right. Like, we would. Literally almost never hear from them and and like not that I want to not like help them but I want them to understand that like Because just because you have this device and I have one does not mean that I am at your beck and call All the time. In fact, I've taken my school email off my phone for the last couple years Like so I don't even email on my phone.

I only do it impressed

Meghan P. Nolan: by that

Dan Dissinger: These, all these things happen with time, with the therapy, because like, [00:18:00] if I don't do this.

Meghan P. Nolan: You're telling me I need therapy. I need to go.

Dan Dissinger: We all do. That should have been a mandatory like thing. That should be a mandatory thing for all faculty. And it's no joke. There should be either group therapy meetings once a week for all faculty or some sort of like

one on one that we get because I would find that, like, moving into mid career, as you're saying, that, like, that is the thing that is the most challenging.

It's not this work. This work is work. Like, it is the mental and emotional part to it that is, that I feel like some of the people that we went to school with really knew how to do, like knew how to balance. But I feel like there was no time to really teach people how to do that because they were trying to push us, get, get us into the dissertation writing and get us out and get, you know, we did it, you know?

And, and I understand that. Like, I totally get it. Like, but this is [00:19:00] the part that needs to be discussed. I mean, this is as I'm going into this year as being like more of my mental health and more of my ability to be functional and happy. Is important because then I could do my work better and then like, you know, but if

Meghan P. Nolan: everybody could, I like, it's not just academics, but I, there's something fascinating about, um, our profession and you're right because it's not covered and we've talked about this before, right?

Like, there are so many things sort of missing from our pedagogical rearing. We're like, and we, we talked about this before, like the administrative part of like our jobs that a lot of us sort of take on these responsibilities. And like, that's never discussed and we don't know what to expect from that.

You know? Um, and I think that that facilitates those boundaries being blurred even further, right. Um, it's, it's hard stuff and it's, it's kind of weird that we don't address it. But I think that's why I [00:20:00] feel like I have to mention these things to my students, because I don't tell them, then they don't learn it.

It's not, it's like this weird unwritten code, right? Like, you have to figure out how to navigate all of these different personalities and professors. And like you said, some have clear hard cut boundaries, others don't. But then they'll like push things too far, or you know what I mean? So it's like, we have

Dan Dissinger: to

Meghan P. Nolan: learn.

We have to help them somehow. Um, but yeah, I don't know, but that's, that's something that I've kind of started doing. Um, and it's become a part of my sort of like, just natural thing that I do in the classroom now, I guess.

Dan Dissinger: Yeah. Yeah. How do you going into this semester with. And I guess this is like a lot of people have been talking about this at USC now, and we get emails about it actually, um, the, the role that, like, especially in the Honors College, maybe with AI and, and chat [00:21:00] GPT and all this, like, I know, right?

Like, it, it's becoming a thing. And I feel like in a lot of ways, too, I think universities are trying to figure out, well, how do we collaborate with it? Like, it's here. How do we use it? I am probably, for me, much more of a hard line being like, like my students are buying notebooks, like physical notebooks this semester.

They had them last semester. We are doing some things by hand, we are going to do things like outside of that computer, doing as much as we can, because I need them to figure out that they can create ideas without the computer. This leaning on something to kind of like give them the ability to figure out counter arguments or stuff They could do it like I might want them to be like you could do it It's all gonna be okay, and we also do workshops and stuff like you can use those times speak to one another You know don't speak into the ether, but like I Like, has there been deeper conversations at SUNY Rockland on, like, the role of AI going into maybe the next semester or coming out of [00:22:00] last semester?

Meghan P. Nolan: There have been, and there are, like, these two factions on campus.

Dan Dissinger: Yeah.

Meghan P. Nolan: And I'm sure this is happening everywhere. We're like, there are these people. Who, um, who think it's okay to use AI and they encourage their students to use it for their writing. And I find that that's problematic for a lot of reasons because like you as a, as a writer and an English professor, um, I take umbrage to that.

Um, and I think it's, I think you're exact, I think if we, if we teach students to rely upon those things, things too much, then we're heading towards idiocracy for real. Like that, that movie becomes very real in that circumstance. If we don't know how to think critically for ourselves. And we can't afford that because one of our SUNY gen eds, like the requirements is critical thinking.

And so to me, we cannot allow students to use that as a crutch. Right. Um, and so there are these people. People, I have faculty members, like colleagues of

mine who [00:23:00] admit to using it for their own writing too, like they don't write anything of their own. And I'm like, ah, like that scares me. Um, so, but then the English department, uh, we took a very hard line on it.

Um, and we actually met as a department and came up with a policy. So regardless of the RCC policy, where it says, um, you know, and they actually, they say that it's, it's not allowed either. But I think there's like more, a little more wiggle room in theirs. We said, absolutely not. Right. And so if a student is caught using it, um, then we have them either and it's up to the professor.

They either have to rewrite the assignment or they could fail. Um, so, um, And so, and this is something that I have to deal with in the honors program, because I've had students that I've had to kick out because they've used a multiple times, um, you know, obviously the first time we're going to have a conversation, but they, I have to have them sign a release form saying that they understand these things.

Um, so it's something that I take [00:24:00] extremely seriously. And I, I know all of my colleagues in the English department agree there. We didn't have anybody within the department who felt otherwise. Um, but we do, we have some colleagues, um, elsewhere at the college who just feel like, Hey, it's not a big deal.

It's no big deal. Um, But I struggle with that. I really, really do. And I make it very clear in my classes. Um, that's something that I did talk about prep for the spring. I made sure that it's not only posted in my syllabus, but that that English department policy is posted in D2L, like you said, has to be multiple places.

Um, I want to make sure that they understand it. Um, I take it very seriously. Now that's not to say, I think of it like this. It's kind of like Wikipedia, right? We all know we all use it, right? But it's not a source. You, if you want to go to the source, go down to the bottom and you get the source and go directly to it.

[00:25:00] So I think of AI like that, right? It's like where, um, you could, there are ways to use it where it's not, uh, putting your words into, um, or the, the AI words into your own paper or not thinking on your own. But I think the problem becomes that. There are a lot of people who can't differentiate between how to use a tool like that that way.

And you need very responsible teaching and very deep understanding of AI in order to do that kind of teaching of how to use AI. And it also scares me, I don't

know about how, how you feel about it, but like that AI generates off of other AI. So, you know,

Dan Dissinger: Cannibalistic. It's like, at this point. Yeah.

Meghan P. Nolan: Yeah.

And so it's just like, it's pulling from other AI to give you some answer. And like, I've literally gotten answers that are incorrect because it's pulling from other generative language on the internet. And so [00:26:00] that's a tough thing to teach. Um, it's tough to navigate. And I just don't think we're there yet.

Dan Dissinger: Yeah.

Meghan P. Nolan: In terms of, um, you know, an English department, um, as a system and nobody's in a, in agreement yet on where

Dan Dissinger: do

Meghan P. Nolan: you have those factions too at USC?

Dan Dissinger: I think at USC, it's a little more, how do I say this? I feel like there's more of a, well, we have to adapt with it. Like, or a little more AI gung ho people really like it, but, or, um, I'm.

I guess, really. I always saw myself as someone who was pushing the boundaries using technology and stuff. You know, like I podcast, yeah, you worked, I do this, I do all these things. But when I started seeing this, I was just like, this is different. Like there's, because, and my, I don't know who I was talking to, they said like, what you saying?

Like AI's using other [00:27:00] ai. So it is becoming dumber. Like actually, like it, it is going to become much dumber. Right. But at the same time, like. I find AI like that, like that generative AI work, like it, it's plagiarizing everyone's work that's online, like it is taking from hard work that people have put in, like visual art, audio, writing, everything, it is stealing everything that what everyone has been doing, and then creating mediocrity, right?

And not just mediocrity. And Carmen Kynard, Dr. Carmen Kynard wrote an amazing blog post. I don't even want to call it a blog. It was an amazing article on her website saying that what is happening also is that the AI, AI chat GPT

and all those generative AI writing generative AI programs are just re inscribing white supremacist like writing styles.

So all the work that we've been trying to do to [00:28:00] work on rhetoric and composition work to kind of like talk about Right, like voice and talk about like identity and writing in the ways that outside undoing these like hard constraints of the academic like racist academic voice It

Meghan P. Nolan: all

Dan Dissinger: goes away now because like it all it's just writing Mediocre white voice work.

That's what it's doing. And now

Meghan P. Nolan: and it's regurgitating stuff that's already out there. So like we said, the critical thinking is gone. But I just thought about I teach them in the fall. I teach a, um, a rhetorical analysis course is writing in the disciplines. And if I'm teaching students to analyze rhetoric, and it's all like robot shit, like,

There's so much being lost, and I'm like, and I hate to sound like a Luddite, I get it, and like, I'm an English professor, you [00:29:00] are a writing professor, like, of course, we're the ones who are like, anti it, but like, I'm with you. It's not just that I, I think you said it though. It's like anybody who has anything to do with the arts, we see the danger there, right?

Um, You can't just take stuff that exists and repackage it and call it something new. Um, that's not how this works, but that's exactly what AI does. And it's a scary thing. So I worry about humanity.

Dan Dissinger: I worry about human. I mean, I mean, like if it's, I said to my students last semester, I was like, I want you to think of this.

I want you to think of what you're doing. You're, you're putting a prompt or a question or. a permission in a way into the chat into the chat bot box and you're basically asking permission of this artificial intelligence to like, can I do this? Is it possible? What is the idea? Like, I'm like, you are asking nothing for permission.

[00:30:00] I'm like, you have the permission to make this idea. I'm telling you to do it and it's okay. All you need to do is tell yourself that this is what I believe. These are my values. This is what I'm interested in and follow through. There's

no reason to do that. And I'm like, and if you're afraid of drafting, I'm like, we have four weeks to write this project.

You have plenty of time. We're going to get it done. And I think also maybe it is sometimes, especially at USC, And this is why I know at USC a lot of students do it. It, it is the pressure of the, of like a school like USC of like getting A's all the time. Student athletes, I can imagine why student athletes do that because their schedule sucks.

Like it's absolute trash, you know, to be a USC student athlete and have to be up at four in the morning, do your, do everything you do, then go to a class and then have all these classes and expect to do [00:31:00] all this stuff while still performing. And so they, there's no humanity in that way either. So like going into this next semester, it's like, how can I provide that space where students feel okay to make mistakes writing while feeling like it's okay.

They'll learn from it.

Meghan P. Nolan: Yeah, I think you like you hit on something that's bigger than just writing, though, because this goes to a larger problem, because I see this all the time. Um, with the honor students and like, they'll freak out if their GPA goes down like one point, or if a professor gave them like a half a letter grade different than what they felt they deserved.

Um, and so there are a couple of things sort of happening there. Number one, it's something that we didn't deal with when we were younger, where there's this, um, like constant questioning or pressure, um, on the professor to like, to do what they want us to do. There's that part. [00:32:00] Um, which like, can you imagine?

No, I never would have approached my professors the way some of these students do. Like it wouldn't have even occurred to me. Um, and so that's like socially something has like tweaked. Um, but I think there's that pressure you're talking about comes from the formative education arena where they're coming into college and regardless of which institution I'm sitting at the community college level and like, granted, those are the students who transferred to the tier one school.

But I, like, it's, um, it's depressing because I, I find myself saying to students all the time, you do know that that number doesn't define you, right? That one point isn't going to change who you are. And so when you were talking about your

students, um, like you're giving them permission to do it, part of me wonders if they even know how to give themselves permission to do that or to.

[00:33:00] Yeah. Get past those barriers because it's so ingrained in them from such an early age.

Dan Dissinger: That is, I mean, I think that is something I, every semester, my colleagues and I, we're trying to see, like, trying to figure out, like, how to ease or ease these students sometimes into knowing that this is a learning, this is a space where you learn.

But I think that's also changed and because over periods of time as I've been teaching. And over the period of time that I've been a student, that I've had experiences where, like, grades were grades and they were there, but I think there was much more. It's like, okay, like, I'm learning here. I'm going to make mistakes.

I don't know this. But now it's almost like I teach students that feel like, and this is no fault of their own, like, but like, that they're coming in there to prove that they already know it. [00:34:00] And. That is something that they've been socialized in the education system to see, to be like, and instead of coming in being like, I know nothing, let's work this out for 15 weeks.

And, and, and so that, it's almost like I'm trying to like, get my class back to that. And, and. I don't know how sometimes, but I'm like, I have to figure this out because they're coming in here to try to prove to me. They can write an a paper day one. And I'm telling them, we are not even doing a traditional paper.

So relax. It's

Meghan P. Nolan: a process, right? Exactly. This works.

Dan Dissinger: I mean, imagine going, like, we were all doctors, we were doctoral students. Imagine going into those. I'm going to prove that I can write my dissertation day one. I, I looked at my dissertation now and I'm like, Ooh, boy, I don't know about this. Um, like, I'm just like, but you learn over time.

That's what this is about. But I think also that's the importance of like, what we do in the [00:35:00] humanities and going into this semester. It's also like, for me being like, Humanities matter. Humanities matter. And I'm trying to take that in as much as I can.

Meghan P. Nolan: It's funny you say that because that is one of the things that I'm looking forward to most about this semester is that we're redoing our humanities degree.

Um, I think right before I came on board, they had switched and they, they added specific tracks. So there was like the English track, the honors track, the history track. And so students had to take specific courses on those, those tracks within the humanities degree. But what we realized is that, is that we were doing a disservice to our students by not allowing them to take a more general degree because they are missing out on these sort of critical thinking and character building and knowledge of like historical background and philosophy and all of these other things that they could get if we broadened the degree and we didn't have these specific tracks.

And so they're still able to concentrate [00:36:00] in English or in these specific areas, But we've, we've removed the tracks. We're working on that now. And, um, like I'm kind of excited because that means that I also like the courses that I've been changing have to teach or have to change a little bit. So I like, I'm looking forward to some, like, this may be the last time that I teach my contemporary poetry class.

It's like, that's crazy town to me. Um, and like, because it's a class that I really enjoy, um, and my students really enjoy, but the writing's on the wall that this may not be the, the right course for right now, you know what I mean? And so I've got to look at a different course. So that's going to be some development work that I have to do outside of the classroom.

You know what I mean? In preparation for next year. Um, but I am excited to take that on and see sort of where that goes. Um, I may [00:37:00] even get to teach a theory course.

Dan Dissinger: Oh.

Meghan P. Nolan: Yeah. Although I don't know how that goes for undergrads. I don't know.

Dan Dissinger: Yo. I, I just want to tell everyone out there, when, when I started teaching in 2009, I was an ad, like teaching as an adjunct, they just let me teach anything.

And I remember. Uh, at SUNY College at Westbury. Shout out to everyone at SUNY College at Westbury in the English department, first year program. That

was my training ground and I am indebted to everyone there because they just trusted me and I remember them going Dan, we need you to teach this theory class and I was like, what theory class?

Like lit theory. I'm like, I have no idea how to do this. My first theory class was insane that I taught. I didn't know what I was really doing, but I got through it and it was fine. I taught theory so many times after that. It was one of the best times. I loved it. I love teaching theory to undergrads. And sometimes it was so much fun because like I was [00:38:00] going In a direct, I was doing things that they didn't necessarily like, believe, like the, my, the other English professors, like you're teaching that and like, yeah, we're doing this, we're going to fucking go for it.

And yeah, and they were fine. Like, it was great. So, oh man. Okay. That gives me hope

Meghan P. Nolan: then.

Dan Dissinger: Especially because like students don't get like that type of theoretical work is so fun to talk about that. Like, even with like a book, like all about love that I taught last semester as a. As the way bell hooks is, I mean, the way bell hooks writes in terms of like the accessibility, but the depth that she goes into in terms of the practice of love, they, the students were like, oh my God, like, this is way deeper than I thought it was going to be.

And so they really enjoy it. And I think because they're missing some of that, like, they are missing that long meditation on. On ideas that they can apply to the world. I mean, we're [00:39:00] going into a whole way, a whole interesting world. I know, and this is, you know, it's

Meghan P. Nolan: funny you say like a meditation and connecting that to theory.

I think that's why, because there are a few classes where I embed theory in. Um, without letting them know like what I'm doing. Um, and those are the classes where we have like really deep conversations and like everybody's like upset that it's the end of the class period and we have to like leave because we have so much more to say.

And we're like, okay, we'll pick that up next time. Um, So, yeah, but this, this is why I'm kind of excited about that. Cause I'm like, this may be, you know, the time to expand into that and sort of change things a little bit. So sometimes you

need like, um, like an impetus for change and you know what I mean, it's all for the right reason.

So we'll see.

Dan Dissinger: And I feel like it empowers students. And I feel like now sometimes students, they feel either disempowered or they, they [00:40:00] feel exhausted from just the world. And, you know, I feel like. That's another thing, like going into like this coming semester, it's just like, how can I make this matter, you know, especially in the political climates that we're going to be part of, like, it's hard sometimes, especially as a writing professor to go into the class and be like, for it to make this general education course matter to them, that it is going to be something that they're going to use and something that's going to be, you know, applicable and, Every semester, it's like, how do I do that?

Like, how can I do this? And sometimes I've been opening more and more multimodal work, more and more, like, students do more podcasting, they do more video work. A lot of my students last semester did a lot of surveys and interviews with people and, like, a lot of one on one conversations. And I think, and they loved it.

They're like, oh, I didn't think I would get so much out of just talking to someone. I'm like, yeah! But it's not, [00:41:00] see, that's, it's our world. And that's the thing I'm learning. I'm like, I'm 42. It's becoming just my world. I just, but I feel like I want them to see that, like, this is a tool you can use to speak to people that is important.

And I think they don't know, but some students don't see it. And I get it. Uh, you know, they're, they're, you know, Buried in so much technology that like they don't see like the most important thing they could do is just like Sometimes look up and just look at that I mean we did an exercise where we just stood in silence for five minutes outside and had to meditate Yeah, it was for a lot of them.

They were so they were so anxious And but like that was one of the most memorable times of the class They're like wow, and I'm like, how'd that feel? They're like, I don't know Oh my God, it felt so long, but it's so good. I'm like, yeah, that was like from two to five minutes. They're like, really? And I'm like, yeah.

And I'm like, see, I'm like an hour. I was like, you have two to [00:42:00] five minutes in your, in your life to take time for yourself. And I'm like, you have to

do it. I'm like, cause that's going to make the writing better. I'm like, it's just, it's just a hundred percent, you know? So I don't know, maybe more things this semester where we're outside.

Cause I could do that at USC. So I

Meghan P. Nolan: always want to do that. And like, never like pans out, like every single time I have. Plan to do it. There's something, it rains, there's something going on in the quad. There's a, you know what I mean? It's like, so I'm like, maybe I'm just not one of those professors.

Dan Dissinger: But also like what, okay.

I used to believe that college was always just like the cool professor goes outside. Yeah. Yeah. It doesn't happen. One time in my whole education career, as a student, we did that once, shout out to Bhanu Kapil, took us out on a walking meditation at Naropa. That was the only time that that ever happened.

And then that was it. And I don't

Meghan P. Nolan: think I ever did. Now that I think about it, I don't think a single professor, a single teacher [00:43:00] took me outside unless it was like a science class and we had to be outside. We'll

Dan Dissinger: find a worm.

Meghan P. Nolan: Yeah. Right. We're taking it back to the lab.

Dan Dissinger: We're going to dissect this worm.

That was the budget of my school in my high school. Worm dissection.

Meghan P. Nolan: I mean, this is, this is the stuff we deal with, though. Like, think about that. Like, it's revolutionary for them to, to think, oh, like having a conversation with somebody, like, I can learn so much.

Dan Dissinger: Which is so funny because, like, we work so hard as doctoral students to get the pedagogical aspects of our career down.

Right. But then, Sometimes it's just the simplicity of being like, let's just talk to each other for a second, go outside, ask five people the same question. That was

an assignment I did last semester. Like go this week, ask five people, one question inspired by all about love and [00:44:00] then write something about all the answers.

But like, How simple is that? There's no text like we've read language of symbolic power and all these things and like, you know, whatever You know Sometimes it's so much more simple than Then we've made it out to be and like, you know, I feel like maybe that's a lesson that going into 2025, even if you're listening to this other professors, like thinking about your weeks, or if you've already started and you're thinking about assignments, simplicity could be key to this all, you know, because they're already bogged down by complexity.

These students.

Meghan P. Nolan: Yeah. Although I kind of do the opposite with my writing prompts so that AI can't answer them. I make them like so like convoluted so that I explain it in the classroom and then I'm like, all right, try to figure that one out. Uh,

Dan Dissinger: like

Meghan P. Nolan: original essays too. Cause I just [00:45:00] like, I can't, like, I'm not interested in reading regurgitated garbage from the internet, you know?

Um. Do you, I hate to be back on the AI thing too, but do you ever have problems with students using Grammarly Pro? Cause that's one that comes up as being AI generated because that's what it uses to fix sentences. And we have students who like cannot understand that. They can't do this. I don't

Dan Dissinger: know. Like I'm trying to think if they use it or not.

It's hard. Um, maybe there's a, there's a part of me that I, when I, when we were talking about AI as USC being like, we have to catch everyone or how do we, how do we figure out who's using it? And there was a part of me in my head being like,

Is that my job? I don't know if my job is to catch these students. This is the hard

Meghan P. Nolan: thing, right? Like, Yeah,

Dan Dissinger: and I tell them, I'm like, look, and in my head, especially with USC, I'm like, I tell my students, like, in the first week, I'm like, listen, these

projects are more personal. So if you need to use AI to find something out about [00:46:00] yourself, that's a, that's an existential issue.

They're like, I don't have time for it. And they're like, haha. And they, you know, it's funny because they're like, okay. And then I'm like, Okay. At the same time, I tell them, I'm just like, I'm like, you all pay almost 100, 000 a year to be here.

Meghan P. Nolan: Thank you.

Dan Dissinger: If you really want to like then half ass it this way, I mean, that's on you.

Meghan P. Nolan: But then they get like surprised if they don't pass. It's funny you say that about the personal story though, because we have like a running issue in one of our science lab classes where everybody, I'm not even kidding you, everybody who uses um, AI to answer this particular prompt that they give every semester, uh, comes up with the same generic story about their grandmother.

Their grandmother used to smoke and it doesn't anymore. So now we know. Oh, the exact same grandmother with the exact same issue. It's like, dude, you couldn't come up with [00:47:00]

a personal story to like, make a connection?

Dan Dissinger: It's like, but that's the thing. And I tell my students, I'm like, if you don't know what you're interested in right now, and especially in writing 340, which is seniors and juniors and seniors, right?

Meghan P. Nolan: It's a 300 level course, man. If

Dan Dissinger: you don't know what you're curious about, like, And you've got to think about it because some of you are going to grad school.

I'm like, you are going to be. To be curious and interested in something and to follow that interest.

Meghan P. Nolan: I'm going to tell you about the student I had at St. John's who had like an existential meltdown in my class.

Dan Dissinger: No.

Meghan P. Nolan: Oh, this poor thing. It was, it was an 1100 course. It was like, she, she, um, realized because I had them writing a lot of personal stuff, I was like, look, cause exactly what you said.

I was like a text can't. Teach you this like I need you guys to think critically about your own lives and apply what you [00:48:00] want to do and she realized that she had never been taught to think on her own and And that she hadn't done anything without her parents or a teacher or somebody telling her what to do And literally broke down in tears In my classroom, it was like, what am I going to do?

What am I going to do? And I'm like, Whoa, like, there's so much going on there. Right. And you have like students who are making it to a 300 level course like that. Like, that concerns me, you know, like, you should be able to like. To discern what works for you. What doesn't like kind of have an idea of what direction you're going.

And especially at that point, like I get it in the first two years, we typically deal with the students in the first two years, um, not knowing which direction you're going in, but also maybe we do a terrible job as a society of getting people to understand that whatever you're studying in college, like that's not the [00:49:00] end all be all.

You're not like married to that for the rest of your life. Like things change. Like I always try to tell students like, look, I worked in technology for a long time before I even became a college professor, realized that I wanted to teach for that matter. Um, like it's not, you know, I feel like they think.

They have to make a decision and they're, they have to stick to it. And that's why they're like paralyzed. Like they're afraid to make a decision one way or another, you know? And I feel like students are like that with their writing too. Like they get like hung up because they're like, well, if I commit to this thing, like, you know, and it's not true to me, then what?

Dan Dissinger: I absolutely. And I'm like, that's, I've tried to lay my assignments out this semester. Like my major assignments being like, you are developing towards the final. project. There's stops in between and those will be their own [00:50:00] projects that we assess. I'm like, but For the first two, it's all kind of gathering towards this last one.

So if you want to change gears and you find something a little more interesting, it's okay. That's what I do in my

Meghan P. Nolan: creative writing class, exact same thing. It's like we're working towards this larger project, but a lot of students pivot midterm. Like they pivot because they're like, wait a second. I can't finish this out or this isn't going the direction I thought it was.

Dan Dissinger: Yeah, because it's like, that's how it actually works. I, I remember my first dissertation idea, like, my original idea for my dissertation was to look at writing from Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Hunter S. Thompson, and try to find this link between the I remember that! Yeah, I was like, oh, this is gonna be great!

And I remember talking to Dr. Ganter, shoutout Dr. Ganter, he's like, Dan! You have a whole life to write things. You're never gonna finish this.

Meghan P. Nolan: Pick a project. [00:51:00]

Dan Dissinger: Yeah, he's like, let's pick one person. Who? I'm like, Kerouac. He's like, great. He wrote so much. What do you want to focus on? And we looked at just several books in the before, even before On the Road, and there are even more now.

But like, I remember that, and I'm like, thank God. Because like, if I had to just choose something, And even in the idea of my perspectives and stuff and just be like, that's it, you can't change it. I would still be there. Like, you know, it would just never end. And I think like, students sometimes feel like they can't switch.

So like, I've been trying to open as much as possible in my courses to be like, I want you to continue to rethink this. I need you to see that some of this isn't going to work and to nail down what will work. And move in that direction and that's all going to be okay. Like it's all going to be fine. And like most of what I do is like, you're going to be okay.

It's all going to, it's all going to be [00:52:00] fine at the end.

Meghan P. Nolan: I feel like that's most of teaching and like, and now I teach mostly creative writing and literature. Like I used to be like very heavy in like the composition field and I moved away from that. Like as the years went on and that was something I didn't really see.

Like, like you're talking about, like, and the doctoral program, like, I was very staunch. I'm like having both of those, like book ends. Like I felt like there was a connection between them. I wanted to do them both. And I've moved like really into like literature more so in creative writing. Um, and it is like constantly teaching students.

It's okay. It's all going to work out, but you have to trust things. You have to trust. You have to kind of like let things go. Um, and you can't, um, you can't force things. I think that's the hardest thing to teach students. You can't force something because the harder you try to force it, um, the further off it is, it's, it's, it can't come to fruition.

You're blocking [00:53:00] yourself. Um, and that's true of creative writing, of academic writing, of any kind of writing. I feel like, um, you know, um, it's fascinating.

Dan Dissinger: Wow. I feel like we can keep going. I, so I'm going to just ask you one more question. This might be an impossible question, but let's say there's a professor, there's a new professor coming into the semester that there are, like, obviously, uh, that this is their first semester, possibly teaching, whether, you know, adjunct or not, like, because we're all doing the same work.

I mean, literally, that's another big lesson. We'll get to that in another episode about titles.

Meghan P. Nolan: Titles, what do they mean?

Dan Dissinger: Titles.

Meghan P. Nolan: And yet we have to teach them.

Dan Dissinger: What is the difference between adjunct and associate professor?

Meghan P. Nolan: Well, office hours.

Dan Dissinger: Yeah, office hours. That's

Meghan P. Nolan: the one thing, [00:54:00] office hours, right?

Dan Dissinger: Emails. Uh, so. Yeah. Um, but if there was a professor, like, listening to this as new, this is their first semester, if you could give them, like,

uh, some sort of advice, what would you, what would you possibly leave them with?

Meghan P. Nolan: Oh, boy, first semester. I'm like, I have to like, think back. I, I think it goes back to what I said earlier about it. And I don't know if that's something you just have to like, learn as you go, but maybe trust your instincts a little bit more and feel out your class before you. Make like critical decisions about the assignments that you're giving.

Um, give yourself the freedom to adjust things based on a particular class. Don't feel like everything has to be the same from semester to semester or even section to section. Sometimes we teach the same course, multiple sections of the same course in a semester. And, um, early on in your career, you'll [00:55:00] be like, very like, you know, stressing out that like, they both have to be on the same time frame, or like, they both have to hit the exact same points.

Um, that's not true. Every classroom is different. Every, um, every cohort is different. Um, and just, uh, give yourself the freedom and allow yourself to teach that particular group of students and not, uh, feel so restricted by your syllabus.

Dan Dissinger: Awesome. Awesome. That is some great advice, everyone. If you're new this semester, take Dr.

Megan Nolan, Megan P. Nolan's advice, because it's sound advice. Actually, it's advice that I wish I had when I was an adjunct, because the advice I got before I walked into my first class was this. You know everything, they know nothing. And then the door opened and I was there!

Meghan P. Nolan: It's terrible. That's like the opposite of what we teach.

Like Freire would like jump out of his skin. [00:56:00]

Dan Dissinger: So yeah, Megan, thank you so much for being on this episode. First episode of 2025. It's been a joy to just, you know, talk about everything and just, this is going to be a good semester hopefully for everyone. Um, trust yourself, like, you know, like we were saying.

And then, um, you know, definitely follow Writing Remix everywhere you get your podcasts. We are, we are. I am recording more episodes and releasing more episodes this year. Last year was a little rough. There might be an episode kind of like talking about, you know, the follow, you know, coming into this

year and the, you know, sort of reasons as to why Writing Remix has been so inconsistent.

Um, and, you know, follow Writing Remix on Instagram and threads at [writingremixpod](#) and we are moving to blue sky, um, and probably abandoning X, [00:57:00] who gives a shit, and then, uh, And then there'll be a substack starting as well. You can listen on substack and it might be some extras there that we're going to, that I'm going to work on, but we're looking forward to an amazing year with a writing remix and talking with some amazing people.

We already have some amazing episodes lined up, so definitely tune in and tune in, uh, follow and just listen and leave comments. All right. And if you're a professor, leave comments in this episode is like any advice to 2025, but Megan, thanks again. And everyone see you in the next episode.